MARDOCK SCRAMBLE

Translated by Edwin Hawkes

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SAN FRANCISCO

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Book I:

THE FIRST COMPRESSION

Chapter 1

INTAKE

01

A girl murmured, in a voice that could barely be called a voice, "I'd be better off dead."

It was the half-hearted sound of words that weren't real, words not meant for the man next to her.

It was a sound that she thought could *just* be heard above the bustle of the pleasure quarter of Mardock City, over the noises that drifted in through the car windows.

She perked up a bit after speaking the words, as if a jazz singer had cast a spell with a song.

She was floating along in a four-ton black jewel. It was the highest class of AirCar there was, its body kept silently afloat by the Gravity Device Engine. All the door windows were Magic Mirrors—you couldn't see anything on the inside when looking in from outside. You needed special dispensation to have this sort of window—*Hunter Killers,* they're called, windows to keep the cops away. And of course, to get that special dispensation, the city needed to consider you a person of *suitable* standing.

Usually there was a chauffeur assigned to the car, but now it was on complete autopilot, gliding through the city unconcerned.

Perhaps the car wasn't so much the jewel as it was the jewel box. Perhaps it was the girl inside that was the jewel. Certainly, that was what her appearance suggested. The shimmering lights of the city lent her cheeks a lustrous sheen, illuminating her innocent face. It was beguiling, seductive. Her slim body, her piercing ebony pupils and her fawnlike eyes, her shoulder-length black hair: all there to give the client the pleasure of an encounter with an exotic doll.

Doll was just about right. That was her status in life. She might be treated better—well, she was considerably more expensive—than the likes of those you found in the sleazy Internet classifieds: *Seduction by Precocious Nymphette. Milk-Colored Lollipop Girl.* But human desires are what they are, wherever you were on the social scale. *Needs are needs.* And anyway, she was already in a colorful uniform of her own: gaudy striped tights that showed off her not-quite-yet-developed thighs and calves, her skinny little ass wrapped tight in white hot pants. She might as well have been advertised as *Sexual Innocence Available Here* in one of those creepy ads.

Over her outfit she wore a trench coat that came down to her ankles. The type so beloved of the Senorita class of girls. It was spread open, and both her hands were stuffed deep in her coat pockets. She was the very picture of a cute, alluring young thing who'd been transported into an adult wonderland.

It was just then, as she was thinking about herself, reacting to the bright lights of the city, that the words were born:

"I'd be better off dead…"

She spoke the words. The spell was cast. Her thick red lipstick, heavy on her mouth, felt just that little bit lighter.

"What is it, Balot? Did you say something?" asked the man sitting next to her in the back seat. He was a weaselly figure, with his smooth, swarthy skin and black hair slicked back in a ponytail. He was enrobed in a white coat and was facing the girl. His photochromatic Chameleon Sunglasses, with their shifting colors, settled on a sharp crimson tint.

"Nothing, Shell. I was just thinking about you at the Show earlier tonight."

When the young girl replied, the man curled his handsome lips into a smile and stretched out his hand toward her.

"It went well today. The deal at the Show. And it's going to go well from now on." As he spoke he caressed her cheeks, rejoicing in her soft lines.

There were a number of diamond rings on the gambler's hands. All platinum with Blue Diamonds. They were taken off during the Shows, and one of the girl's jobs was to look after them while he was gambling. One of the diamonds was conspicuous, brighter than the rest, and the man called this one *Fat Mama*, because, as he said, "I called in a favor from an acquaintance who works in *processing* to have my dead mother's ashes turned into a diamond." Motherly love was eternal, so he reckoned, and brought him good luck to this day.

The man had a great many other rings, and the girl didn't know whether the diamonds on them were made from the ashes of people *other* than his mother.

"Open the fridge and make me my usual drink, will you?" In response to his request, the girl gave a little murmur of assent, opened the door to the car refrigerator, and made a gin cocktail. She squeezed the lime, dribbling its juices into the drink. The surface of the beverage was absolutely still thanks to the smooth ride that the AirCar provided, and all the while, right up until the moment that she proffered the drink to him, the man's hand continued stroking her chin.

"There's a good girl." The man took the drink, lifted up the girl's chin, kissed it, and put the drink to his lips.

The man, an upstart from the slums, was now one of the city's leading Show Gamblers and also the proprietor of many of the city's legal casinos. The girl was an underage prostitute—a Teen Harlot—whom he'd bought, and (for the time being) she was exclusive to him, not required to service any other customers. On the contrary, the little runaway was treated as a valuable commodity—she'd even been given a new identity, namely a fake citizen's ID card.

"Everything that you've lost, I'm going to give back to you." That was what he'd said to her when the brothel that she worked in was rumbled and she had nowhere to go. The girl had often heard stories of the authorities granting guarantees of safety—a new identity, name, and address—to informers who had given important information that resulted in the indictment of *certain people* from the city's crime gangs. But the girl was hardly looking for *that*.

"Does this mean that…you love me?" The girl asked this question, and the man narrowed his eyes and smiled. His eyes were shining as he gazed upon her, his irises said to have been turned Emperor Green, a color he selected when he put himself through the operation. And this was what the man said:

"You've asked the perfect question. That's exactly right. The definition of love is *to give*. And there are rules. Rules that the receiver of that love has to *obey*. As long as you abide by those rules, you'll continue being loved."

The girl, in her simple way, thought that the man was kind. Sticking to the rules was nothing. She'd lived under all sorts of rule and misrule so far. Well, apart from when she ran away from the Welfare Institute, unable to endure any more sexual abuse. But in order to survive since then she had *completely* stuck to the rules of the adult wonderland she found herself in. She'd done anything, dressed in any way demanded of her.

Nevertheless, one lingering doubt remained: *Why me?*

She'd asked this question a few times—asked it of the man, asked it when no one else was around. The question of all questions. *Why is it* me*? Why do all the customers ask for* me*? Why*

does this man want to give me *all these things? Why, out of all the other girls just like me, am* I *living this sort of life?*

The girl really just wanted a simple answer. Like the sort a parent gave a child. *Because I love you.* She could be loved by the man, or God, or fate. As far as she was concerned, all that mattered was *to be loved*, and that would be enough to answer all questions such as *Why me?* That was the answer she wanted from the man. But—

"Never *doubt*. It's the road to ruin."

This rule meant that the girl had to endure a different sort of ordeal from the ones she'd suffered in the past.

"The recipient of love shouldn't have any doubts. No need to trouble yourself with questions such as *Why me?* You're not permitted to have any doubts as to why *you are who you are*."

In particular she was absolutely forbidden from touching on the details of the new citizen's ID card she'd been given.

The result of all this was that she had no idea even of the name under which she'd been registered when he bought her. Not until six months had passed—in other words, not until yesterday.

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Behind the high-class AirCar that carried the man and girl through the pleasure quarter of Mardock City was a red convertible. One glance at the convertible revealed that it came from the coastal quarter of the city—the fact that it had tires gave it away. It might have been cheaper to buy a lifetime supply of gasoline than to buy an AirCar (with its Gravity Device Engine that ran virtually for eternity without the need for charging), but at least the owners of the car were *able* to buy gasoline. That showed that they must've been at least *something* in the city.

"Almost at Central Park. We're going to need to switch cars, eh?"

An easygoing voice emerged from the driver's seat. A tall, lanky slip of a man. His hair was tie-dyed, and his charming, reddish-brown eyes were covered by a pair of Tech Glasses of the sort that was so popular with lab researchers.

"Let's stop and take stock of the situation before we head into Central Park. If it turns out to be nothing to worry about, we should withdraw."

A rich, booming voice answered, but there was no one else in the car besides the driver.

"No way it's going to turn out to be nothing. I'm the one who led the profiling on him, right, Oeufcoque?" It turned out the man was speaking to the Nav, the in-car navigation system next to the steering wheel. "That man's been 'looking after' six different runaway girls. Of those, four commit suicide. Two, nobody knows their whereabouts. Look at the stats from the Center for Guardianship of Minors. It just doesn't add up."

The man spoke with conviction, and the Nav's lights flashed in answer.

"On top of that there's the little fact that all the girls died or disappeared shortly after checking their own citizen's ID for the first time, right, Doc? Well, I calculate there's a less than two percent chance that *this girl* has managed to access a Citizen Records Bureau. The way I figure it, all's well and good as long as nothing happens to the girl."

The location, speed, and orientation of the black AirCar in front was shown in precise detail on the Nav's screen.

"Stop being so damn wishy-washy. We've staked our lives on this work here. You don't want to be treated as trash, right, Oeufcoque? If we don't get the guys who are behind that man then where's your *usefulness*? Nowhere. You'll be useless—and the fate of useless things is to be *disposed of*."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I actually have to *hope* that something bad's going to happen to the girl."

"Sure. Mind you, the real question in this situation is whether the girl is going to accept *you*. A *Scramble 09* like you."

Presently a blip ran across the screen of the Nav and a dark voice echoed all around.

"With humans…some live as objects, and it's not always the case that they even *want* free will."

"Hey, I'm sure she'll understand just what a good thing you are. Her life's in danger. That's where we save her. She'll witness our *usefulness* firsthand, right?"

"Even if she does have her life saved, it's not at all unlikely that she'll reject us…"

The screen grew ever more blurred.

"Stop being such a mope. *Que sera sera*, right? Oi! Hey, stop hiding away." The man banged at the Nav with increasing urgency, and eventually the screen recovered.

"The target's left the road. He's faster than I thought."

The screen showed that the black AirCar had left the freeway and was moving directly toward Central Park.

"It's here! He's changed the autopilot's course. He's broken the pattern set over the last forty-seven days."

The man was gleefully getting ready to give the steering wheel a big yank when the voice of the Nav stopped him in his tracks. "Don't follow straight after him, Doc. We'll take a detour and intercept him at his likely destination. Keep your distance."

No sooner said than a number of possible routes came up on the screen, and before long they settled on one of those.

"Why've we chosen this road, Oeufcoque?" asked the man as he turned the steering wheel again.

" 'Cause if nothing happens we'll be able to head home on this road without having to pass them."

The man sighed—he should have known it—and responded, "If nothing happens, eh? Oeufcoque, my naive little soft-boiled friend, do you really think we live in such a gentle world? When you think about it, what is there *really* that divides our little patch of earth from the fires of hell down below?"

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"Ah, yes, and we're stopping right there beside the lake." The man slid both his hands over the girl's body as he spoke.

“Don’t forget to set the timer for our rest. The password’s the same as before.” The man’s hands were creeping incessantly about the girl’s body as she did as he ordered and set the course for the AirCar with the remote. The hands that never broke into a cold sweat even when a hundred thousand dollars was at stake, that had coolly won many a deal, the gamester’s hands that had caused so much excitement in the Shows—these long, slender fingers had now slid into the girl’s underwear, forced her legs apart, burrowed deeper and deeper (or so she thought), and at the same time the other hand played with the swell of her breasts, squeezing and gently pinching them.

Even as the man explored the girl’s body she was somewhere else—unresisting while silently assisting him with his *needs*. Her coat had already been taken off, and the fingers moving about deep inside her hot pants were getting wet. Sensing a change in her breaking, he slid his other hand under her shirt and inside her bra. Still the girl silently continued to program the course into the AirCar, and the man took great pleasure in the way she let out the occasional involuntary moan.

“We’ll do it as you’re programming the remote.” The voice from the man, now behind her, commanded, and the girl closed her eyes, *obeyed the rules*.

As the girl closed her eyes and slipped out of consciousness, the sensation of the man’s hand inside her gradually diminished—all sensations isolated—and it was as if everything in the world were happening on the other side of a thin film.

This was the girl’s talent, and indeed it was a skill that she constantly had the opportunity to polish. Right now she was able to observe even her own reactions and physical responses from a safe place within her heart.

Don’t stay hidden in your shell, someone would say.

Come on out, they would say.

That was the sort of response she’d always had from the myriad of people in her life—social workers, the people from the institute, passing friends, colleagues, employers, owners, clients.

But this city had a different set of *needs* for the girl’s special talent.

It turned out there were quite a few clients who liked their girls to be dolls.

Clients who got off on the idea of girls who closed off their hearts, girls who acted as though they were asleep or dead.

“Balot…” the man called into the girl’s ear. Just as many clients had called her before.

Balot. The name of that delicacy in which a chick in its egg was boiled alive and eaten straight from the shell.

At first it was a nickname given to her by the mistress of the brothel, half in jest. But the name soon stuck and became her *trademark*. Just as word quickly spreads of a particularly special dish at a restaurant, the clients came searching her out, and she became popular. No one told her *not* to stay hidden away in her shell any longer. Instead, that became her job. To continue hiding herself away in a thin husk. A girl—boiled to death in her own shell by the heat of a man’s ardor—a sweet, balmy delicacy was born.

“Good girl. You’re an elegant little doll, like a figure in a painting. Now, open your eyes.” The man spoke in feverish tones. The girl obeyed, meekly. The vision that confronted her when she lifted her eyelids was like a world viewed from the bottom of a lake, shimmering away in the distance.

“Do you remember the rules, Balot? The rules you need to obey if you want to be loved?”

Caught off guard—just as when he had asked her the question in the past—the girl just nodded her head vaguely.

“Do you know what happens to girls who forget the rules?”

The sound of the man’s voice sent a sudden chill through the girl’s heart. She was taken aback. She realized that the glitter of the city had disappeared and that they were now surrounded by the gloomy gray of the park.

Behind the girl the man slowly took his sunglasses off.

“Shell…” The girl spoke as if she were swallowing her own breath. That instant the man’s large body came down on top of hers. The glint at the back of his emerald eyes was different from any sort she’d ever seen before.

“You be obedient, Balot.” The girl stiffened slightly when she heard the sharp tone in his voice, but of course, in the end she did just as the man commanded. The girl meekly serviced the man’s *needs*, and at the same time the AirCar eventually came to a halt by the large lake in the park, resting still in the air.

02

Central Park was known as the *Spot of Spots*. It bisected the city, and it was the only place on the circuit where different classes of cars—which were easily identifiable according to where they were coming from and where they were going to—might ever cross paths.

Take the middle-class Cheap Branchers, for example. They migrated into the city in droves, and might drive from their homes in the purpose-built skyscrapers of the coastal district down to the pleasure quarter, but they would never go near the high-class Senorita district in the east, let alone the industrial estates to the south. The slums sprawled out throughout the southern districts, kept in strict isolation from the immaculate streets.

In other words the red convertible wouldn't be able to park right by the lake just because the black AirCar had done so. That would immediately arouse suspicion. So the convertible picked a riverside spot a few hundred meters away from the path toward the Senorita district the AirCar would later be taking.

The night was thick and moonless. After the convertible killed its engine you could hear even the wind beating against the leaves on the trees.

"There! There! It's that man's car!" Oblivious to the cold night wind of early spring hitting his half-jacket, the driver of the convertible nudged his Tech Glasses up with his finger and said,

"Oeufcoque, time to *turn*."

He grabbed the Nav with his other hand.

"Got it," said the Nav. And then a strange thing happened. The Nav lost its shape. A squashy distortion, and in a twinkle it was a pair of binoculars.

"Too dark to see anything, Oeufcoque."

The man was looking over his glasses into the binoculars, a frown expressing his dissatisfaction. As he did so the binoculars lost their shape in his hands. In less than a moment they had squidged, like quicksilver, into a pair of night vision goggles.

"How's that, Doc?" said the night vision goggles. The voice was identical to the Nav's.

"God damn, looks like that AirCar has a real expensive Gravity Device Engine," said the man that the goggles were speaking to—the Doctor—as the solemn sight of the black car entered his field of vision. "I'd bet the shock absorbers on that thing are so good that a gunfight raging inside wouldn't even register on the outside. Let's have a look for the passenger in question…no, Magic Mirrors. Can't see inside, just as I thought."

"Save up all your requests for one go, will you, Doc? Wait a sec, I'll change into a pair with heat detectors." The goggles distorted again. This time only the lenses. As this took place a kaleidoscope of the reds and blues of human body heat unfolded before the Doctor's eyes.

"Nice one, Oeufcoque—however tricky the request, you deal with it in a flash, the *All-Purpose Tool* that you are." The Doctor peered through the goggles, satisfied.

"They're violently *entangled*. Could be engaged in hand-to-hand combat, Doc." The goggles spoke in a serious tone, but the Doctor just shrugged his shoulders.

"Hmm…you could say they're *engaged in hand-to-hand combat*, yeah. *Right* in the middle of it. Man and…woman. No one else in the car. Let's start filming."

"Already recording. But these images aren't enough to determine whether we have the right

man?"

"It's Shell-Septinos, make no mistake. A modern-day Bluebeard. The color of sin, the death of the six young girls—it's flowing through his veins. I can *see* it."

"Yeah, but your testimony alone isn't going to count for much down at the Broilerhouse, Doc. With all the fake footage about these days, recorded *evidence* has stopped counting for much."

"I know. But you've got records of his physical characteristics, right? If we can just identify something *specific*—any ailments, treatment scars—then a heat scan of his somatic cells *will* come in handy as evidence."

"According to an ailment scan we have a 72 percent chance of determining that it's definitely him, by my calculations."

"What about his brain? He's had operations there. If you can identify those."

"The brain is difficult…48 percent chance."

"The Broilerhouse won't even take a second look unless we're talking over 90 percent. What about the girl?"

"Rune-Balot." This time the goggles answered immediately. "We can conclude it's her with a 96 percent certainty. She's the underage prostitute *scouted* by Shell-Septinos back when she was a kiddie porn star."

"Damn it. This'd be useful evidence if *she* was the one we were trying to stop from killing *him*."

"Wait…something's odd." A quieter voice from the goggles. The Doctor's face tensed immediately.

"Odd? What's odd, Oeufcoque?"

"The *odor*. I'm getting smells from the car—not just *pleasure*, but something else mixed in there too."

"Explain that in a way that I can relate to. You know your nose is *special* !"

"There's the marked smell of…*fear*. They're both *afraid* of something."

"What? In the middle of *doing it*? Not just the girl, but the man too? Why?"

"No, it's nerves…stress. Both people are subtly different but…similar."

"Hone in on Shell, the man, analyze *him*. We might be able to work out his motives for his crimes to date, Oeufcoque."

"It's almost like a *death wish*."

The Doctor was visibly stunned by these words.

"What? Shell's planning a suicide pact with the girl?"

"In a sense…that could indeed be the case."

"What a perfectly crazy bastard. Right—mission aborted—we need some serious psychoanalysis here. Okay, now that we've come this far our next step is to pay someone off, get them to turn this footage in to the Broilerhouse. Any charge we can make stick—breaking the protection of minors law, attempted coercion to commit suicide—whatever! Then we take over her case, offer the girl shelter—"

"Won't work. He'll rid himself of all ties to her while the investigation's under way, and you've got yourself an unresolved case, never to be closed. That's one of the things her fake ID will be there for—so that he can *cleanse* himself of any ties to her in an instant if he needs to."

"Well, what do we do then? Carry on playing Peeping Tom?"

"Hang on…something strange is happening." The voice from the goggles was pointed, abrupt.

“The man’s odor has changed. As if it’s *oozing out*. No suicidal tendencies anymore. It’s *definite pleasure*.”

Right at that moment another AirCar was silently drawing closer from the other side of the park.

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“You’ve *questioned* the status that you were given.” The man murmured while holding the girl. He laughed a sharp, hollow laugh. He stared at the girl, a decision hidden deep in his eyes.

Held by him, the girl just lay there silently. She wondered, through the thin skin that separated her from the outside world, whether it really was such a bad thing to try and work out her own position in life. It must be a *very bad* thing, surely? Part of the girl became sadder and sadder as she thought about this, but another part—the heart from deep within—looked on, utterly indifferent.

“Good girls don’t break the rules. Nice dolls exist to be obedient little decorations.” The man embraced the girl with both arms as he spoke. He wrapped himself around her tightly. This was different from a gentle embrace. It was like he was clinging, almost as if he were about to be dragged off somewhere but had found something to hold on to in order to stop himself from being pulled away.

“But it’s okay, Balot. It’s okay. It’s tough for me, but it’s tough for you too. It’s tough. I understand. So tough I almost want to die. In fact, I am, practically, going to die. Part of my memory is going to die. But even if it dies away, the shape of it can still remain. Just like a Blue Diamond made from ashes.”

The man thrashed around furiously now, ranting and raving. As if he were delirious with fever. As always at these times the girl remained docile. That was her job, after all, her talent.

Eventually the man stopped moving, slowly peeled himself off the girl, and came out of her. He started dressing himself, and she was about to get up too when the man said in an unexpectedly tender voice, “Stay just the way you are, Balot.”

So the girl lay sprawled in her disheveled state, and all she could do was gaze absentmindedly back at the man as he laughed his thin laugh.

“What a wonderful sight. A beautiful sight. And after this you’re going to turn into something even more beautiful,” the man murmured as he moved farther away from the girl, pressing his back against the car door.

“A Blue Diamond.”

A watery smile, then the man raised his right hand to show off the glittering rings.

“*That’s* the answer to the question ‘What becomes of children who break the rules,’ Balot.” Speaking these words, the man suddenly opened the door and jumped out of the car.

“Shell…?”

Just as she was hurriedly getting up the door slammed shut with a loud bang right in front of her.

Instinctively she tried to open the door—no go. However hard she tugged at the electric inner handle the door just wouldn’t open. The man turned to look at her. Or so she thought, but then she

realized that he was just using the Magic Mirror windows to straighten his clothes and hair and adjust his sunglasses. He wasn't looking at her at all. The hands pulling at the door handles lost all their strength. She couldn't even speak. The world was distant, and she was overwhelmed by a terrible premonition.

When the headlights of the other AirCar came into view, the girl immediately understood that everything had come to pass just as the man had planned right from the start.

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"Murder! I smell it! The girl's going to die!"

The goggles' outburst was shrill.

"Wait, there's another car! Give me a head count!"

The Doctor pointed the goggles at the other AirCar. Instantly the lenses transformed with a squash, and the body heat sensors turned back into standard night vision lenses.

"I don't believe it… It's Boiled," the Doctor said in a troubled tone. "Look. The man in the driver's seat—it's Boiled. To think that he's now working for Shell! This isn't good, Oeufcoque. If they're planning on killing the girl then any rescue attempt by us could backfire. Boiled is the sort that will shoot her *first*."

Soon the other AirCar pulled up beside the one containing the girl. The new AirCar had normal glass in the windows, and the Doctor could see the stocky man in the driver's seat. Short gray hair and a white face devoid of any emotion. Boiled opened the window and spoke to Shell. His gray eyes flickered, and—

"Shit! He's looking this way!" The Doctor hastily threw himself to the car floor for cover.

"Calm down, Doc. I can't smell any hostility coming from Boiled. Shell, on the other hand, is dripping with murderous intent. It's a very *definite* smell."

"How's he going to do it? Shoot her? Hang her? Poison her? Is the girl already dead?"

"No idea *how*, but it doesn't feel like it's happened yet. Point me at them. I'll start recording."

The Doctor got back up and pointed the goggles at the two AirCars by the lake. The man who'd gotten out of the first AirCar—Shell—was gesturing at the car containing the girl.

"He's waving his hand as if to say goodbye."

"Not really enough to paint a convincing picture of a man planning on committing murder, is it?"

"Of course it's not enough! He could give any old excuse for his actions. What the hell is he playing at?"

"He's keeping her trapped in the car. Shit! His murderous intent is starting to change to *relief*. There's not a moment to lose. My nose is definitely right about this—consider this an emergency!"

"And do what?"

"Move! Save the girl!" the goggles yelled. The Doctor started the convertible as fast as he could.

Up ahead the second AirCar, now with Shell on board, was starting to move away.

The car with the girl in it *wasn't* moving.

The tires of the convertible spun violently, letting off a piercing shriek as the car took off.

At that moment the hood of the AirCar containing the girl exploded into a million tiny pieces.

Stunned at such an incredible turn of events, the Doctor rubbed his eyes. Then more terrible, thundering explosions. The darkness was ripped apart in an instant, the whole scene repainted with the bright red flames of an inferno. A roaring pillar of fire erupted along with the explosions, and the shrapnel from the car poured down in lumps of solid flame, bathing the lakeshore with its incandescence. The weird smell of roasting steel filled the air.

"To think he'd blow up the whole car! Shit, Boiled made me take my eye off the ball! Instant death?" the Doctor said, despairing. Pieces of shrapnel rained down chunk by chunk on the hood and windshield. The Doctor pressed down on the gas pedal, and in his hands the goggles changed shape with a squelch and said:

"An explosion of the front engine. The rear of the car was ripped halfway off by the first blast."

As soon as the goggles spoke they changed—somewhat surprisingly—into the shape of a fire extinguisher, and said, "The car was built to disperse the effects of an explosion. There's a good chance that anyone in the back seat *won't* have been killed by the blast."

"What, so if she's lucky she's just covered in third-degree burns instead? See? *What really divides our little patch of earth from the fires of hell down below?* Why not taste the flames for yourself, Mr. Soft-Boiled Oeufcoque!"

"I'll quench the fires of this world before they get a chance to burn *me*." The fire extinguisher's voice was deadly earnest. "That's my *usefulness*."

03

A number of thoughts ran through the girl's mind just before the explosion.

You've questioned the status that you were given.

She'd just wanted to make sure. She'd just wanted to show her gratitude for the wonderful gift that she'd been given. That was why—just the *once*, she'd decided—she'd secretly accessed the city's personnel directory and learned who she was. She didn't think that this was such a bad thing.

Why me? She'd just wanted to solve the mystery, learn the answer.

When the other car had arrived, she'd considered again whether it was such a bad thing.

And, of course, as it turned out it was. Without realizing it, she was trespassing onto the dangerous territory of a dangerous man. And this was the worst thing in the world.

The man suddenly turned to look at the girl staring vacantly out of the window. Not at the window: he was looking directly at the girl beyond it now, and clearly waving goodbye.

A Blue Diamond…something he can truly love. That's *what becomes of girls who break the rules*.

She could see the glittering rings on the hand that was waving at her. A shudder tingled down her spine amid her confusion. Synthetic diamonds made from human ashes. The rings that had been entrusted to her to look after during every Show. There were seven of them—the man's mother and those poor, anonymous girls. She'd heard the rumors that he'd bought a number of girls and let them die. Those rumors were true. *And now me too*—a wave of nausea welled up inside her. She felt as if something awful had seared itself deep in her chest.

Why? Why me?

The question emerged from her mouth amid the daze. Now the question was no longer about love—it had changed into something more sinister and disturbing. At the same time her nose sensed danger, something burning…a disgusting smell. Sulfurous fumes filled the car, and the alarm in the driver's seat was beeping, as if to warn of engine trouble.

The man continued smiling and waving for a moment, then quickly turned around and jumped into the other AirCar. Just that moment she remembered some of her fellow whores talking about how gangs liked to burn their victims to death. It made it easier to *process* the corpses…

She heard a voice: *Come on out*.

Don't shut yourself away in the shell of your heart. The words of the volunteer social worker from the Welfare Institute.

The shell. That was what was supposed to have protected her. But right now, she was its prisoner—trapped by a man, the man named Shell-Septinos, the man who had promised to give her back everything that she had lost.

She suddenly became aware that her hand was frantically fumbling at the door handle. For a moment, she didn't even realize what she was doing. But of course she was trying to save herself.

Deep inside her own heart, another girl, just awakened, looked calmly on at her floundering hands.

Indeed…

The girl murmured. So this was what it was like. To be shut away in a shell. The door

wouldn't open. Her hands kept on struggling with the door handle. She wondered again whether what she had done was really all that bad.

Balot, somebody called. Ironically. The chick was boiled to death in the shell before it was even born. The clients said it was the name of a rare delicacy. The clients who favored doll-like girls. Balot had become the *pièce de résistance*—no one would tell her not to stay holed away inside her shell again…

Before long the other AirCar started pulling away. As it did, the man in the front passenger seat turned back to her again and waved lightly, carefree. *See you soon*, he almost seemed to say.

The nausea welled up inside her again. *See you soon—once you're a dead body.* Would her scorched remains—her body turned to ashes—really be decorating this gambler's finger as a synthetic jewel*?*

Her chest clenched in dread thinking about this. The body that had survived so far by meeting the *needs* of others: Was this to be its fate? Was she to be used as a *thing* right until the end?

"Die, you bastard. Die."

She was shouting now, as if by reflex. She clung to the window, tried to watch the AirCar as it sped away, but soon lost sight of it and was left only with her own translucent reflection.

"You're a shit. You're nothing but shit. I hope you die, you shit!"

And now she was directing an angry tirade at the man somewhere beyond the window: *foolish, trash.* As if she were singing. Then she inhaled, choked on the acrid air. Tears welled up. Her head went hazy. Her hands were yanking at the door as if her life depended on it. A lingering memory of the man was still burning deep inside her body.

Foolish, trash, ash, cash.

The little ditty spun around in her head. *That's all I am. Was there a version of myself who thought that?* she wondered for an instant and looked out, but only a sad reflection stared back at her. Even now her hands continued to grapple with the door handle.

Josh, fish, gash, hash.

A wave of despair assaulted her, and the part of her that had up to that point remained hidden behind the thin layer of skin suddenly emerged.

"No! Help me, please!"

At that moment the pressure inside the car suddenly dropped, and a high-pitched buzz sounded. Something, somewhere, caught fire.

Flash.

The pain lasted only an instant. A terrible roar and an explosion assaulted her, and her vision was flooded with a blinding white light.

"I don't want to die."

That was the last sound the girl was ever to voice.

In the next instant the driver's seat was blown backwards by the force of the blast, slamming her body against the rear seat before the raging flames flared up and everything became a single mass of fire.

≡

"Are you in pain, Mr. Shell?" the man in the driver's seat asked of the man now sprawled in the front passenger seat.

"Just stressed." The man—Shell—took his hand off his forehead and moved it to his breast pocket. He pulled out the flask of scotch and the bottle of pills he kept inside his suit. He took a swig of scotch, put two of the pills in his mouth, and then followed with another gulp of the whiskey, as though forcing down something bitter.

"Heroic Pills, are they?" the driver muttered. Shell nodded and sighed a deep sigh. His Chameleon Sunglasses were now glinting a deep blue, almost the color of lead.

"When I was a child I had *A-10* surgery on my brain," Shell said. "When my stress levels rise above a certain level, my brain automatically switches to a state of euphoria. It was one of the Social Welfare Department's crime prevention schemes they tried out in the slums. But when I was in my teens they discovered a flaw and halted the scheme."

Shell looked at the driver, who nodded as if to say *I'm listening*.

"There's a chance your brain goes haywire. Back when I was a kid, a friend went blind the moment his stress levels rose. The part of his brain that controlled his vision was destroyed in the chemical reaction that induces happiness. In my case, my memory goes in a bad way. So, these pills are the backup plan. Absolute perfection. Take these and there's no stress, no side effects. Right?"

"Well, at least you know how to deal with misfortune. That's what allowed you to hire me," said the driver. These weren't words of consolation. His tone was devoid of sympathy. His pale, glassy skin seemed strange on a man so solidly built. His hair was closely cropped and mostly gray. Shell thought of him as a revolver.

"Exactly right, Boiled. It means that I can cope with this little *ritual*. And, step by step, I'm able to climb the road to glory in Mardock City."

Shell laughed. He had a simple faith in the man sitting next to him. Even better, the drugs were kicking in. He glanced at the side mirror, noticing again how much contrast there was in the way the two of them looked. His own dark skin, long black hair. A feeling of satisfaction was spreading throughout his body—satisfaction that he was able to hire such a keen professional, get him to do the driving…

It gave him confidence that his plans, his scheme for life, were all working out.

"And every time I take another step toward glory I gain another beautiful Blue Diamond." Shell gazed at his glittering rings as happiness flooded his senses.

Boiled interrupted Shell's euphoria. "I'm concerned about something." Shell shrugged his shoulders.

"What?"

"Back there in the park I noticed a car that was…*incongruous*."

"Incongruous?"

"There's a big baseball game at the dome at seven tonight. It's strange that a car with tires would be in this park."

"What've tires and baseball got to do with each other, Boiled?"

"Electromagnetic waves are blocked within the park to keep it a quiet zone, right? Their car wouldn't be able to pick up a radio signal. What do you think people of *that class* would be doing skulking in the shadows of the boathouse during a time they should be enjoying themselves?"

Shell smiled a thin smile and shook his head. "Whatever. There's no proof of what I did today.

No memory. And even if there is any *trouble*, you'll take care of it for me, Boiled. Trouble is your business, after all."

04

The girl was already unconscious from the impact of the blast before the flames enveloped her body.

This meant her lungs avoided the worst of the fiery smoke—in other words, she avoided, by the narrowest of margins, dying of smoke inhalation. Even so, when she finally awoke in a dim haze the cells in her mouth had been burnt through, and she was barely being kept alive by a tube that was shoved down her throat to her respiratory organs, forcing her lungs to breathe to an automated rhythm.

A voice abruptly leapt into her still-indistinct consciousness. "She's still alive, Doctor! The girl, Rune-Balot, she's alive!"

A voice as if the speaker were rejoicing from the bottom of his heart. And then, in time, a different, more leisurely voice:

"She'll be okay for now, Oeufcoque—her whole body's enveloped in the protective foam. Even so, this is horrific. She's burnt to a crisp. Her skin's lost, and her sense of taste and smell could go too…"

"The poor thing. Do you think she'll resent us for rescuing her, Doc?"

"Well, humans—females in particular—are such illogical creatures. They start to lose the will to live and hate the world the moment something affects their sense of worth. We'll just have to try and reason with her."

"Will she choose the path of *Scramble 09*, do you think? Or will she give up on life?"

"Probably best not to let her know the latter option exists."

The girl—Balot—felt nothing of the world, but just then she saw a curious thing emerge.

The one called the Doctor: a tall, lanky man. Splotchy hair, Tech Glasses, a reddish-brown half-coat that covered a colorful patchwork of a doctor's gown, with syringes, portable microscopes and all sorts of other contraptions hanging from the chest and waist. It was as if the lead singer in a psychedelic band had suddenly decided to say *Look at me, I'm a doctor now*. And then—

Even more bizarre than that. A golden mouse perched on the Doctor's shoulder.

"Anyway, look after her, will you—she could turn out to be a new *buddy*."

"Yup, though at the moment she's more *body* than *buddy*."

The golden mouse just looked at Balot, completely ignoring the Doctor's reply.

The mouse's dim red eyes seemed to contain hidden depths, as if he were a mature, older man. The tiny pants that he was wearing as if to cover up a bulging belly—held in place by a tiny pair of suspenders hanging off his shoulders—seemed hilarious to the girl.

Sharp, focused golden whiskers. And she could see in his solemn face a gentleness that she'd never encountered before.

Their eyes met unexpectedly. A clear expression of concern flickered across the golden mouse's face.

"She's conscious. She looked at me."

"Well, she's drugged to the hilt with morphine, and with these burns she's not in a state to take in anything at the moment. Anyway, you're going to be partners, right? You should at least be

prepared for her to *see* you."

"Generally speaking women aren't too keen on mice…" The golden mouse's eyes were a little downcast. The Doctor stroked his little back as if to say *There, there*.

Balot tried to move herself in order to see them better, but could barely lift a finger and just lay there shaking. She realized in some faint way that she was ensconced in a large capsule. She felt a strange sense of security, floating, surrounded by foam, steeped in liquid, in an egg-shaped portable pod designed for intensive care. Her whole body, scorched through, in fetal position, barely able to lift a finger—floated in that bulky egg.

Shell…

The word drifted through her mind, suddenly with different feelings, associations…

And she dozed off the moment she closed her eyes, losing consciousness again.

While Balot lay half dreaming, the Doctor and the mouse held a curious conversation.

"Memory loss?" The mouse's querulous voice chirped up. The Doctor's voice answered. Balot opened her eyelids a crack and looked out through the solution she was suspended in to see the back of the Doctor's head, covered in its tie-dyed hair.

"Yup, that's my guess, based on the stress and pleasure levels that you sensed coming from him. The side effects of his *A-10* surgery. Whenever it feels under stress, part of the brain selectively destroys the *gestalt*. A sort of suicide of the memory, so to speak. That's Shell's dirty little secret."

"Suicide of the memory…"

"And it looks like it was triggered by the murder of the girl. There's some connection. Each time he kills a girl, he probably forgets that he's done so, but then finds another similar girl and kills again. A sort of *ritual*. Let's see, something like those ancient Eastern religions that wouldn't recognize the existence of a widow."

"What?"

"Widows had to be immolated along with their dead husbands. There were cases when the woman objected and had to be doused with gasoline and burnt to death. I think this is similar to that."

It appeared that the Doctor was now driving. From the back seat where Balot was placed she could see the mouse perched on his shoulder nodding along to the conversation.

"So, Doc, the death wish I could smell from the man was his *memories* committing suicide? And the girl was dragged along as part of a ritual designed for *stress relief*?"

"That fits with everything we know. We've never psycho-analyzed Shell directly, so we can't know for sure in detail. But *knowing that you're about to lose your memories*—that'd be incredibly stressful. Part of your mind is going to go. Maybe it's not surprising he wants to drag someone along for the ride. He probably sees it as romantic in his own way, killing a little girl along with his memory."

That man will die too.

This was the one fact that registered in Balot's hazy state of consciousness. *My Shell*. The man that gave me—a Teen Harlot from the slums—an identity, even if only for a moment. The man that was trying to rise to the top in this city—what a pathetic way for him to die. She felt pity, which then changed into an intoxicating thought: *I'll die with him*. Her sort-of compassion.

If there were ever a moment when her compassion for others could redeem her then this was it.

"It's hardly decent to try and explain away his actions as *romantic*…"

Balot's feelings were shattered in an instant by the mouse's words.

"Death is a solitary thing. It's not as if someone else's death is somehow going to add value to your own, or even give solace to your own life."

Balot unconsciously tried to remove the oxygen mask attached to her mouth. She wanted to say something to the mouse. But she couldn't even lift a finger.

In her muddy consciousness, conflicting feelings of indignation and gratitude toward the mouse were swirling around together.

"Yup, I'm with you there. And in any case, cleaning up after his romantic notions ain't half racking up the expenses. There's lots of upkeep now, Oeufcoque: you, and the girl."

Balot heard the Doctor grumbling just as she was on the verge of collapsing back into unconsciousness.

Many times Balot's consciousness floated back into the real world before plunging back down into the depths of sleep. Each time Balot began to fade, she was assailed by incredible anxiety, only to be rescued by a curious sense of relief. That relief could come in the form of the mouse's voice, or the Doctor's. The prospect of death was steadily fading away. Reality was coming back into focus, and she would now have to live.

Make your choice.

Someone spoke in a dream. It wasn't an order. Rather, it was closer to a question.

The choice to choose your path—the choice of existence. You have that right.

Balot was dreaming. She was floating in the darkness, and another version of herself was gradually swooping down on her from above. And her other self asked:

Make your choice—or would you be better off dead?

Her other self collapsed in a tangled heap, right on top of her.

She remembered the noise from the glitter of the city.

I'd be better off dead—the magic spell that made the heart feel lighter. The words closed in on her, hideously familiar. Beyond the noise was a life full of sadness. *I want you to die with me*—the doll burnt along with the body at a cremation. That was the last *need*. And she had obeyed.

But—

Why me?

The question surfaced like a bubble in the melange of her consciousness.

There was no answer. When you realized this, truly understood that there was no answer to the question of *why me,* all that was left was death. Yes. That was the choice. Whether to live. Why *me*? Why should *I* live? Such a person as *me*. The choice: one of two possibilities.

She felt that no one would say *yes* for her. The burden carried by a person who had never experienced unconditional love. You were either crushed by that burden, or you lived in order to search for that answer: *yes*. To search for the answer to the question *Why me?*

Balot's heart was ripped to pieces, scattered, and sunk beneath the waves.

At length, the thing that she had been protecting—hidden away in her shell—started to rise up slowly from the ruins of her heart.

I don't want to die…

The moment her heart—protected in its shell till the very end, not yet boiled to death—murmured these words in the faintest of whispers…

…that became Balot's *choice*.

05

Josh, crush.

Balot suddenly realized that the little ditty was spinning around in her head again.

Dish, wash, brush, mash.

The awakening happened in an instant. As if the dream state she had experienced had never been.

Gosh!

Balot opened her eyes amid an eerie calm.

An ultraviolet lamp flickered in one corner of the ceiling. Reflective mirrors were fixed above her and arms extended from the bed. It was as if she were on an operating table.

She felt something moving on her back. The bed undulated slowly from left to right in order to prevent bedsores. When Balot moved her body to get up, the bed automatically rose with her, gently supporting her upper body.

At the same time the lower half of the bed started to fall, so she could now bend her legs.

The bed had become an easy chair. Almost like a cradle.

Her focus now moved from the ceiling to the room itself—she was in a huge hall filled with a number of machines. One of the contraptions was beating a pulse along with Balot's heartbeat, and all the cords sprouting from the devices and tubes ran along to the bed, some of which were also attached to her head or arms. Balot looked around the room, listening to the soothing rhythm of the machines pulsing in harmony, working just for her benefit.

The room was windowless, and disinfectant tiles covered the surfaces of the walls.

The dry air was suffused with a feeling of quiet madness.

And then, all of a sudden, the realization—*I am alive*.

She ran her hands across her body. A movement to confirm her own existence.

She wasn't naked but wore a thin hospital gown made of insulating material. Protruding from the gown were her arms and legs, spotlessly clean. Her skin was almost uncomfortably smooth.

Her hair was full of life, as if it had only just sprung up. Cut cleanly, just above shoulder-length, it was now much shorter than it had been before.

She stretched her left arm out and slowly caressed the limb from her elbow to her wrist with her right hand.

It felt like the white of a boiled egg, and—very faintly—there was a sort of spark.

Electricity?

There was no other way of describing it. Millions of little currents of electricity flowed down the surface of her skin.

Not only that, they were in the shape of a complicated circuit. As if woven into an exquisite fiber.

She felt the threads of the fiber stretching out toward the air, one by one, like a spider's web, and that instant Balot understood why she felt so calm.

She felt no insecurity about the room she was in whatsoever. In other words she recognized every little corner of the room, intimately.

Normally, because there were blind spots where she couldn't see, she would have a sense of apprehension. But now, because Balot *knew* the air that touched the skin, she could also feel all the objects that the air was touching.

Even without looking, I know precisely the shapes of the things that are there.

This was because of the millions of threads, invisible to the eye, extending from her body. And all those threads were connected to the machines in the room. Or rather *coiled around* them. And the bed, the light fixtures, the thermostat, the blood pressure meter—the threads had burrowed their way in everywhere.

Balot lifted her still-extended left hand above her head and toward the lights.

She felt the threads again, thin, unbreakable.

Quite spontaneously she pinched the threads between her fingers. An image of *plucking* floated into her mind.

The world was plunged into darkness in an instant. All the lights had gone out. The electricity hadn't been cut. Rather, the switches had all gone off simultaneously.

Balot opened her eyes wide in the darkness, remaining absolutely still.

In the darkness she could sense the threads that extended from her body even more vividly than before.

She plucked at the strings again. A blinding light flooded her eyes. All the lights were back on.

She let go of the threads, and this time took the mass of extending strings and stroked them gently.

It was like a kaleidoscope. A flick of her wrist and anything in sight could be changed in a million ways.

She changed the temperature on the air conditioning. The dial moved, and the tubes fixed to her hands and feet came loose on their own. After a while she didn't need to check the threads anymore. Without even having to move her hands, using willpower alone, she realized that *she could operate any electronic device without touching it*.

I've gone mad. So she thought. *I'm in a strange dream. And I'm causing the madness myself. The very definition of a nightmare that I can't wake up from.*

The fact that she existed was proof that she had gone mad. When she opened her eyes she had become a different creature. Or, strictly speaking, her outer layer of skin had become a different creature. And that creature was powerful. With an as-yet-unknown, but very *definite,* power. Like one who, bitten by a vampire, awakes thirsty, aware for the first time of the new self that they have been *bequeathed*.

And, then…

Balot discovered an old portable radio in the corner of the room. As if it were the only thing in the room that was not under the control of Balot's consciousness.

As she lifted her hand toward the radio she noticed a slight resistance from it. Balot gave a little scowl, and just then the radio started giving off a noise.

An ear-splitting sound rent the room. A grating sound, as if a large crowd of people had all decided to claw at chalkboards.

Balot searched for music in the air. She realized that her senses could extend beyond the confines of the room.

Outside a multitude of radio waves were overflowing in a complex tangle of dissonance.

She plucked one of the radio waves, ran it through her body—her *skin*—and connected the

music up with the radio.

The light on the radio started flickering, surprised, and in an instant began broadcasting *Midnight Broadway*. Balot ensnared the volume control, bringing it to just the right level.

She rested her head back in the easy chair, concentrated on the jolly music, and all of a sudden she felt like crying. But no tears came. There was a gaping hole inside her chest, and everything inside it was all dried out.

As the black woman on the radio—with her husky voice and distinctive accent—came to the end of her song, Balot noticed a presence outside the room. Someone was coming. She could even tell that they had stopped outside, pausing. One man. The electronic waves in the air gave her a clear idea not just of his shape but even his looks.

The door opened.

"Looks like somebody's awake."

That instant Balot turned off all the lights and stopped the radio, as if by reflex.

The man stepped on a pedal at the entrance to the room. The wheels on Balot's easy chair gradually started moving away from the door. Balot waited in the corner, achingly still, where the man couldn't reach her.

"Uh…"

The man cleared his throat and said, "Well, let's start with introductions. I'm Dr. Easter. I'm in charge of repairing you… uh…or rather I should say I'm the physician in charge. Call me… Doctor, Doc, Duck—as in quack—as you like, really. Basically, I'm, uh, *remunerated* by the city authorities for keeping you alive, making sure your life is *improved*... So, erm, that's the way it is."

Balot kept her breathing shallow, watching to make sure that the man didn't enter any farther into the room.

The Doctor gave another dry cough and pushed his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose. The thin film of numbers and displays that were up on his Tech Glasses had disappeared, and they now looked like normal spectacles.

"Hey, take it easy. This is our little hideaway, our *shell*, or one of them, anyway. Used to be a morgue, you know, but it was abandoned after the neighborhood objected. This very room was used for autopsies, so it's a perfect setup for surgery. Go down the corridor and there's a huge room set up to store eight hundred corpses. Amazing, huh? *Eight hundred* bodies, all free for me to tinker with as I please—it's a dream come true. But then there was an earthquake in the area, the circuits went down, total blackout for about forty-eight hours. That's when the good citizens started getting a bit *edgy* about the smell…and that's when we came in, buying this place up as an office-slash-*factory* and made it into our apartment."

The Doctor paused at this moment. He seemed a little out of breath.

"So, uh…it'd be great if we could have some light back, maybe?"

His tone of voice seemed to imply that he'd explained enough for now, that she really should be convinced that everything was going to be all right.

As it was, the only phrase that really registered with Balot was *hideaway. Our shell.*

That was what convinced Balot. It was as though the rest of the explanation were irrelevant. She had once been in danger but was now in a safe place. In the end, those were the two pertinent facts.

Balot turned the lights on bit by bit. She also turned the radio back on at a low volume.

The Doctor threw the radio an odd glance before pulling up a chair next to Balot's easy chair and sitting down on it.

"We, uh, took the liberty of dressing you in a change of clothes. Hope you don't mind. Your old outfit was a pile of ash, anyhow."

Exactly, thought Balot. It burst into flame in an instant. Like the cellophane wrapper on a cigarette carton. It would have melted, lost its shape, and all that would have been left clinging would have been an ugly black lump. *And the same goes for me*.

"Now, uh, open up!"

The Doctor now had in his hand the penlight that had been clipped to his breast pocket. He gestured for Balot to open her mouth. She followed his orders. The Doctor's Tech Glasses started flickering as he looked down her throat, and the layer of numbers and symbols came up again. Eventually the Doctor furrowed his brow and said:

"Nah…no good, just as I thought. The tissue's all peeled away."

That was the moment that Balot remembered something was amiss in her throat. Up until now she'd been too distracted by her new *senses,* and she had completely failed to notice what she'd lost…

"Can you speak at all?" asked the Doctor. Balot's mouth stayed open, silent and gaping, while the Doctor turned the penlight off and returned it to its position on his chest.

"Your eardrums and your sense of smell were fairly easy to regenerate. But vocal cords are a bit more complicated, and as they were badly damaged it's a bit harder to get them stable again. Well, uh, we'll work something out eventually, no worries."

It was as if he were talking about a broken appliance for which he couldn't order any replacement parts.

Balot tried exhaling. Some breath wheezed out, but no voice.

Her throat was like a cavity in a desiccated old tree.

"And how's the skin? Any aches or itches?"

She gazed absentmindedly at the Doctor and slowly shook her head. *The things she had gained, the things she had lost.* She tried to reconcile the two, but couldn't.

"Impressive things, women. Quick at knowing your own bodies. It's less than two weeks since the operation, too."

The Doctor was full of admiration. He was referring to the incident with the lights, earlier. The music from the radio as well. The Doctor knew she hadn't touched either of them.

"*Snarc*. A kind of electronic *stimulation*. That's the name of your *choice*, the power you selected in order to survive," the Doctor informed her.

"Presently about 98 percent of your body's surface is, uh, *wrapped* in Lightite, synthetic skin. That's what they call it when it's not skin tissue donated by other people. It's not originally human skin, *something*—"

The Doctor cut himself off. As Balot cocked her head to one side, the Doctor held a finger up as if to make it clear that *now this is the important bit*, and said, "Regenerative metal fibers—that's what the outer layer of your body is now composed of. They were invented in order to try and understand what it would be like to experience the void of outer space…and that's now been surgically transplanted onto you. These metal fibers have three important properties. Number one, they are *accelerators*—they sharpen all your body's senses. The second, a sort of omnidirectional sensory perception using electronic waves. Allows you to feel everything in the area, sense all its

dimensions. In your current state you could get through life quite comfortably without ever opening your eyes."

Balot nodded her head—she'd just experienced what he described for herself, and now she was having it confirmed properly. Furthermore, the Doctor went on to explain thoroughly what else she could expect to experience, using words unknown to her.

"And number three is the ability to manipulate electricity. Your skin is formed of *outputs*, electronic interfaces. Right now you're a *living remote control* for pretty much any piece of electronic equipment."

At this point the Doctor pushed his glasses up a little with his fingers, clearing the lines that ran across the lenses.

"So, you wondering how you came by this newfangled body of yours?"

An extremely direct question. Again Balot nodded, docile.

"While you were in your coma, we took the liberty of having a little Q&A with your consciousness using a set of questions prescribed by the city authorities. In other words, an inquiry of your psyche. *Do you want to live*, that sort of thing. *You have the right to do so, will you exercise that right,* was one of the questions we asked."

Balot suddenly remembered the dream she'd experienced. A dream about a choice. She had selected something then. But what exactly was it?

"*Mardock Scramble Oh Nine*," said the Doctor.

As if that answered everything.

"Emergency laws promulgated by Mardock City, designed to preserve human life. Within them, number 09—that's *Oh Nine*—gives special dispensation to use technology otherwise forbidden by law. Like when an ambulance is allowed to run a red light when lives are at stake. And *this* is my specialty."

Balot was gripped by the Doctor's words, not even nodding now. *Choice—right*. She felt the two words spinning around like hands on a clock, then snapping into position together. A magic moment. Magic that would transport Balot to a different place. In the interior workings of *choice* and *right* a number of complicated cogs spun together. The Doctor was one of those cogs.

"The boundaries of your consciousness *chose 09*. So, based on this choice, I made use of a certain operation that your unconscious mind requested."

The Doctor turned and smiled—a little nervously, now—at Balot, who remained still.

"So, uh, the question, now that you're awake, is whether your *conscious* self makes the same choice of *09*, as expected. But, well, before we come to that, let's talk a little about where this technology came from."

As he said this the Doctor fiddled with the monitor on his Tech Glasses, aimlessly switching them on and off.

His actions were unsettling. The reason for this would soon become clear: the Doctor was about to talk about himself, not just explain Balot's predicament.

"Many years ago, I was involved right at the heart of our space program. It was a case of pretty much anything goes, whatever we needed. The government spared no expense. This was because space exploration was the cornerstone of our strategy against the enemy across the sea, the Continent—our space program kept the balance of power and resources in our favor. In other words, I was one of the last of the war generation, and at the same time I was one of the first of the postwar generation, after everything turned topsy-turvy."

Balot showed no sign of interest. War stories were irrelevant to her, and she'd never had a soldier as a client. Also, it was something that she'd learned at work. *Not to do anything.* Let them talk, wait until the other person says everything that needed to be said.

"I suppose you'd call it the flow of time. Seven years after the war ended, I was stripped of my doctorate. Well, not only that, I was also held responsible for experiments on live human subjects and was almost thrown in jail. It was kind of the fashion at that time to play the blame game, throw about accusations of the odd war crime here and there. And I was dragged into that *game*. And, uh, the thing that saved me is our old friend, *Scramble 09*. We have to prove our *usefulness* as specialists responsible for overseeing *09* cases. For example, I don't know, *saving your life*. And if we don't do so, our fate is to be *disposed of* from this world—that's how it goes."

At this point the Doctor grinned and pointed at Balot.

"So, for example, the skin you're wearing—we invented it, and it was one of the inventions banned at the end of the war. And, uh, if you accept it, we can then submit it to the Broilerhouse—the Ministry of Justice—as part of your Life Preservation Program."

Balot tilted her head. She was alive here and now, and she wondered why they needed a program to preserve her life, to protect her.

"There are people who will try to kill you the moment they learn that you're still alive. The reason I gave you this technology wasn't just to bring you back from the brink of death. It was also to give you enough strength to *freely defend yourself* afterward."

In other words, Balot's crisis was the Doctor's salvation.

The Doctor was the sort who was very good at tying loose ends together, making virtue out of necessity. Some of her clients had been like that. There was a job he needed to take care of, and someone like Balot needed to be *engineered*, so why not link the two together? *Needs must*, a client would tell Balot as he embraced her. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, but if you *had* to break eggs then why not cook them sunny-side up?

But, of course, there was a flip side to *sunny-side up*—dark, blackened. There were plenty of eggs that could be broken in this world. And this city broke many of them, too many.

"The reason you get to live on *for* is up to you. If you want revenge, get revenge. If you want to start your life over, you're free to do as you like. We've got plenty of money…or perhaps I should say we're going to make it. But that's after you've cooperated with us. Do you think you understand?"

She understood well. And that was what a nod was for at times like this. Then the other person would tell you what they wanted from you.

Balot lowered her eyes and gave a small nod.

Breathing an obvious sigh of relief, the Doctor:

"We're PIs—private investigators, or rather *special* investigators, specializing in *Scramble 09*s. On request we solve unofficial cases, acting as Trustees, taking responsibility for Concerned Parties—that's victims such as you—and making sure that things move smoothly and fairly. In return we're rewarded by the Broilerhouse, with money and a warranty of our *usefulness*. It's even possible that, as a result of *this* case, the technology that I've given you will be made legal."

Balot considered this, keeping her eyes downcast. *And when had the Doctor started referring to himself as* we*? It was* I *up until a moment ago, wasn't it?*

And that word, *case*, again. The sharp cog spinning around in the space between *choice* and *right*. All she'd done was make a choice. But what on earth had she chosen? Sure, the Doctor had

explained how Balot's strange abilities worked. But what was their purpose?

What on earth should I do now? As she was thinking this—

"So, what we want you to do is this. First, go to the Broilerhouse and request that you—as the Concerned Party in this case—be given the opportunity to solve it. Next, nominate us as Trustees, as we've been in charge of the case so far."

–Case?

A sudden voice. The Doctor was visibly taken aback.

Balot too was taken by surprise. She'd done it completely unconsciously.

–Whose case?

A voice like static. It was coming from the portable radio. Or, more accurately, Balot was interfering with the speakers, *snarcing* them, changing the sound into words.

Strangely, though, it was as if the radio were doing the work for her.

As if the radio sensed what she wanted to say and offered to say the words itself.

The Doctor slowly turned his eyes back from the radio toward Balot and spoke.

"Shell-Septinos."

The moment she heard the words Balot's heart started pounding. She was able to sense the physical changes that her emotions were causing and could measure them as precisely as clockwork.

"He's the man we're after. He perpetrated the crime. We're the ones who *deal with it*. Having said that, although he's bad enough, he's just a pawn himself, being used and manipulated."

–In what way?

"Shell's working for a certain large corporation. OctoberCorp—you know it, of course?"

And of course she did. All of the casinos that Shell managed were connected to the enterprise one way or another. OctoberCorp, the giant conglomerate with its roots in the pleasure industries, now firmly in control behind the scenes of many of the city's media outlets.

"This corporation is our nemesis, as it were."

–…nemesis?

"There are cases other than *Scramble 09* in which permission is given to use forbidden science. OctoberCorp, you see, was founded by people who worked in the same laboratory I used to work in."

The Doctor hesitated a little at this point.

"Amusement, you see. Or pleasure, comfort, whatever you want to call it. That's OctoberCorp's *usefulness*. Using a variety of technologies they furnish the good citizens of Mardock with their amusements, and in this capacity they're not too worried about the legality of the *pleasures* that they so generously dribble into the city. Narcotics, pleasure devices, illegal Shows, whatever your heart desires it can have."

And, one part of that is the *special* technology they donate to the inhabitants of the slums, under the guise of welfare.

The Doctor explained that the *A-10* surgery—which made the brain secrete chemicals that transform stress into euphoria—was also trickled in by OctoberCorp.

"Shell is one of OctoberCorp's rainmakers, in charge of money-laundering operations. They use all sorts of methods to launder their money. There's a very good chance that your recent exposure to life-threatening danger was part of Shell's business ops. So you could say that you and we have an enemy in common."

In other words, the Doctor was saying that Balot's attempted murder—or murder—was *for a purpose*.

Well, that answered one part of the question—*Why me?*—that Balot was looking to have answered.

Why do I have to be killed?

Surely there must have been a definite reason. A reason far removed from love. The heart was already beating softly. The temperature of her heart was frighteningly cold. As if she'd turned into an insect or something.

An insect could live by its instincts. But, at this moment, this life held nothing.

Balot held on to the most important part of the Doctor's words.

"We will preserve your life and arrest Shell. We'll receive a bounty from the municipal authorities and when we're paid, we'll split it down the middle. As the enemy is part of the stupidly large OctoberCorp, the reward won't be less than a few hundred thousand dollars. Enough money to change your life plenty."

The Doctor was now zealously trying to persuade Balot. As if to say *If it's what you want then take all the money. We'll give you whatever you want to fulfill your needs*.

"You'll gain a new life. This case will prove our *usefulness* to society, and—even better—we'll expose OctoberCorp for all its crimes and iniquity!" the Doctor said.

It didn't seem like he was about to say anything further.

It felt like he'd run out of steam just as his rhetoric had started to get going.

Balot didn't even nod. Her eyes hadn't seen anything. In her mouth she tasted fire.

She could clearly taste the fumes she'd inhaled when she burnt to death, like an old wound.

An old song played on the radio. A woman sang a mournful tune, accompanied by a piano.

When the song ended the Doctor opened his mouth as if to speak, but Balot used the radio to speak first:

–…the mouse.

The static from the radio formed the words.

"What?"

–Cute. And talks.

The Doctor's eyebrows rose. As if he were surprised. Balot continued:

–Golden, like egg yolk, it/she added.

"Whew!"

A sudden outburst. The Doctor threw his head back and burst into laughter.

"You held on to consciousness in that state! What incredible aptitude! Not even most astronauts would be able to do that, even after their specialist intensive training!"

After his little outburst, the Doctor turned around toward the portable radio for the first time.

"Hey, come on, Oeufcoque! The lady's calling you!"

But no one answered.

"Jeez, what a shy guy you are."

The Doctor skipped out of his chair and picked up the radio with a mischievous grin on his face.

And then—what do you know?—he suddenly raised the radio high into the air and threw it down to the floor.

The sound of the radio smashing startled Balot. The antenna flew off along with the handle, the

speakers popped out, and the volume control knob rolled across the floor.

The knob rolled under the feet of the dumbfounded Balot before collapsing on its side.

"Way to startle a lady, Doctor!"

The knob spoke in an incredibly raspy voice. His tone was somehow troubled.

"*Turning over,* it's called, or just *turn* for short. This little fella here can return to his usual self out of any of his fragments," the Doctor explained, ignoring the voice coming from the knob.

"This guy was originally developed for space exploration. He has this hyperspace within his body, and by reversing this substance that he's got stored up inside it, he's able to *turn* his body into any object you can think of."

Balot picked up the knob from the radio. Softly, she rolled it around in her hand.

And then she remembered the curious exchange of electric currents that had just happened between her and the radio.

The Doctor informed her of its name: "Oeufcoque."

" 'Cause he's a half-baked little thing, when it comes down to it."

As she thought on this, the thing did indeed *turn* inside out. The part of it that was a radio knob went inside. At the same time, a mouse with golden fur emerged. It was the mouse from her dream.

"Good evening, madam."

The mouse gave a polite bow of introduction from Balot's hand. Somehow it was standing upright, on two feet.

"You have no objection to a mouse, I hope?"

The mouse spread his arms as if appealing to her, and Balot tilted her head toward him.

"For my part, I'm somewhat different from an ordinary mouse, so do feel free to speak to me without disgust… No, wait, you aren't able to speak. Hmm. Well, if it would be of assistance I would be glad to become a radio again. Do please let me know what's convenient, radio or television, as you desire."

Balot tilted her head again. She didn't feel bad. She remembered that the mouse had said something important in her dreams. To do with death. And its value. She wanted him to say it again. *Why me*—she felt he might be able to teach her a different answer to this question.

"What are you jabbering on for? Talk to her about our work, the task—" the Doctor interjected, amazed.

"There's such a thing as taking it easy, you know." Oeufcoque stabbed his finger toward the Doctor. "It was quite a shock for her, after all, the whole affair. Let's start off with a bit of TLC for the mind."

"You want me to prescribe her some Prozac? Or should we get her wasted *just enough* that it doesn't interfere with her work?"

"No, I'm saying we need to get her to a state where we *don't* need to do those things."

–What should I do?

The speakers on the floor suddenly emitted the words.

The Doctor and Oeufcoque turned to look at Balot at the same time.

–Do you need me to nod to say that I'll help you? Or maybe sign a contract?

"Well, that didn't take long!"

The Doctor was all smiles now. "Okay, so, keep gripping that thing—Oeufcoque—and I want you to visualize what you can about Shell-Septinos."

Balot had no idea what the Doctor's words meant, but she quietly got on with doing what she

was asked. She gently wrapped her hands around Oeufcoque's body and thought of Shell.

Oeufcoque's red eyes stared at Balot.

Balot's jet black eyes also stared back at Oeufcoque. And then she thought of the thin smile Shell gave her at the very end. His figure waving at her from outside the car window. The Blue Diamonds on his fingers sparkling brightly. Just thinking of that light glinting made her heart slowly ooze poison.

Her lips trembled. The shame and the sadness suddenly surged through her hand and was transmitted to Oeufcoque.

Then Balot's deepest feelings started to take shape and appear.

This was Balot's new ability—and Oeufcoque's.

Oeufcoque *turned* with a squish. Oeufcoque's face, with its troubled expression, disappeared in an instant—and in its place Balot felt a profound weight in her hands.

A golden revolver had appeared in Balot's grip.

Balot stared at the revolver. She wondered whether this was the answer. As she did so the trigger cocked itself. *Click*. She felt the bullet loading in the steel chamber inside the gun. This was, without a doubt, Balot's *snarc*. The gun knew of Balot's despair.

"Well, I didn't think it would take the form of a gun with such accuracy." The Doctor stared, fixated on the gun, and continued. "Now your psychoprint is recorded inside Oeufcoque. Physical evidence of your heart, as it were. And, using your heart as our foundation, we're going to protect you and fulfill our objectives. So, we'll defeat the man known as Shell-Septinos, smash OctoberCorp—"

"You've got it wrong, Doctor," Oeufcoque interrupted, still in the form of a revolver. "She's going to shoot herself."

The Doctor's eyes widened.

"She still has feelings for the man?"

"No, not that," Oeufcoque said. Balot realized then for the first time that the gun didn't *have* a trigger.

That was Oeufcoque's will. And it was the first act of kindness that Balot had received from this curious little mouse.

She felt the warmth of a body in her palms. The gun lost its form with a squelch and *turned* into a golden mouse before looking up at Balot from within her grip.

"She just can't break out of the shell inside her heart. There are too many things around her that cause her pain."

Balot breathed the air, deeply. She opened her eyes wide and stared at Oeufcoque.

"What's this?"

The Doctor's face was doubtful.

"The girl's lost everything. We're the ones who saved her. It's our responsibility to help her find a sense of purpose in the life she's now living. My *usefulness* at the moment is to make sure she doesn't make the choice to abandon life."

Oeufcoque looked right into Balot's eyes. Mature eyes, as if they were filled with a mixture of dignity and courtesy. In the end even the Doctor couldn't argue with Oeufcoque's words. Balot understood that quickly. She also understood the reason.

She didn't know how, but Oeufcoque had the ability to search a person's heart, see through them in an instant. Also, the power to evaluate the value of that heart. A power that Balot, the

Doctor, the people of this city, all seemed to have lost.

The mouse and the girl stared each other down. As if two pieces of a whole had finally met. They remained like that for a good while.

Eventually the Doctor, who had been left all on his own, nonplussed, said, “How’s about I shine a spotlight on the happy couple?”

It was all he could say.

Chapter 2

MIXTURE

01

Adagio string music floated through the bar, caressing its contours.

A man sipped a scotch at the counter.

It was a basement bar in a hotel on the East Side of Mardock City. The hotel epitomized the postwar excesses of the city: brash, shiny, flourishing.

As the night went on customers flocked to the bar. Here and there, business was discussed. Big deals—the sort you wouldn't even hear of in the south or west parts of the city—were discussed as if they were a new type of drug.

The man listened to the noises of the joint, as expressionless as the bartender in front of his eyes.

The man's name was Dimsdale-Boiled.

Right now he worked for Shell. His body was big, but cold-blooded.

Before long, Shell-Septinos appeared in the bar and sat down next to Boiled.

Shell took his lead-gray Chameleon Sunglasses off and ordered a gin. *Cut a lime in two and drop the halves in*, Shell ordered, *and don't forget the powder*.

The bartender silently chopped the lime, took a capsule in his hand, and sprinkled its contents on the flesh of the fruit. He squeezed the lime into the gin and dropped it into the glass.

The powder was from a Heroic Pill, one of OctoberCorp's special bargains. It had recently started getting popular with the East Side rich, so in this place it was actually quite pricey. Drugs leaking in from the west could actually go for almost ten times the rate in the east. The Social Welfare Department had put some safer drugs on the market, but no one liked them. They didn't have the same effect. The Garden Plaza in Central Park supplied this bar, and most of those who went shopping there returned home with these pills. There were those who fed them to babies who wouldn't sleep. They helped you quit smoking, give up drinking. But whether from the east or west, very few of those people who took the drug actually knew what happiness was.

"What's it like to be reborn?" Boiled asked.

"Like I was in a long dream."

Shell smiled a watery smile.

"*Clapping*—memory preservation—that's what I'm about." He pointed to a spot just above his right eyebrow. A small pin was embedded there. "I attach a cord here. It's linked to my frontal lobe with fiberoptics. From here I can download my memories and save them. This wipes them neatly from my mind at the same time. I have to do this once in a while, apparently, or my brain wouldn't be able to cope with all the memories and would start decaying. Originally I had the operation done to cope with the aftereffects of *A-10* surgery, but now I'm finding it useful in all sorts of other ways."

"Sounds useful."

"Oh, it is."A crackly laugh spilled from Shell's lips. "And when you say you'll let them fiddle about with your brain you get a free pass to any hospital you like. Gives them invaluable clinical data, you see. You're treated like royalty."

"And what happens to the *data*? I mean the stuff downloaded from your brain, not the clinical sort," asked Boiled.

"Put it like this: are there any dentists who want their patients' cavities after they extract them?"

"And what's the chance the data is being copied?"

"I won't say zero, but the odds are tiny. I'd say about the same chance as someone going all-in in a poker game when they have nothing at all in their hand."

"How many times has that situation come up during the course of your life?"

"Who knows. We're talking about what happens in my dreams, after all."

Shell grinned. A smile as cold as the drink in his hand. And, his expression suggested, would be just as sharp as the glass would be when it smashed. "With my most recent memories, I'm now ready to proceed with the deal. Not a deal like the sort that's always come down from higher up. A deal that I'm proposing myself. My memories are the chips. And in order to beat any concealed card, I have you as my ace."

Boiled nodded silently.

"And, as payment, the *past*. For most people it's invaluable. In my case it's just worthless. We're just talking about a *josh*, stuff I don't even want to remember, stuff that leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

A low-pitched laugh leaked out of Shell. Boiled said nothing.

"I started life as a cheap little bookie—a *punter*—for OctoberCorp. Then I earned my stripes as a star gambler. I had a casino entrusted to me, and money started flowing in left, right, and center. That led to a job *cleaning* money. I cooked up schemes to launder their money—and accrue interest at the same time—that they hadn't even dreamed of. I gave rookie politicians—those on their way into federal government—the chance to enjoy themselves at *preferential* rates. I got them to pool the money from their parents' businesses in our treasury. All sorts of dirty deals."

Shell spoke in a singsong voice. He was in a frighteningly good mood. Shell was a man who was climbing the *Mardock*—the Stairway to Heaven—out of the slums and right to the top.

"But do you think I'm going to settle for that? If that's all I achieve then how am I different from a high-class maid cleaning the toilets of the rich? Maids clean dirty toilets and take care of the beds. I clean dirty money and take care of the bets. No real difference. So I'm making a deal. *To make me one of them.* I'm able to abandon everything. I can throw everything away, completely, and become a new person. They should know that—I've shown it to them many times over, haven't I? And then when they remembered all the things that I *cleaned* for them, they started to take me seriously. Do you think that I've been pointlessly discarding my memories up till now? You must be joking. They're safely recorded and stored in a safe place that only I know. That's my game. And it's your game too. That's right, isn't it, Boiled?"

Boiled slowly nodded his head.

"I'm happy being an empty shell. The contents are still to come. A container to be filled with glory—that's what I am."

At this point Shell finally calmed down. Such was the madness of Shell. Who could understand the feelings of a man who sold the memories of his own past piece by piece?

"I think that I'm going to work extremely well having you as my employer."

Boiled spoke softly. Then, quietly, he took a newspaper cutting from the inner pocket of his jacket and placed it on top of the counter.

"A *Mardock Scramble 09* has been proclaimed."

Shell read the article in silence. He ordered a second gin, then looked at the article again. Not

read—looked.

"Who is she? This girl?"

"Rune-Balot. A girl from your dreams who should have died."

"Dreams? Ah, so, the *raw material* for a Blue Diamond that the cops in our pay were going to collect for us—it's still alive and kicking, is that it?" Shell murmured in a voice devoid of any emotion and drank his gin. He drank away his possible past along with the lime juice and Heroic Pills. Shell's next move came quickly.

"Since when has the case been under someone's charge?"

"The preliminary courtroom business was concluded a few days ago. The girl gave the Broilerhouse some sort of information and filed charges of status fraud and attempted murder," said Boiled.

"The Life Preservation Program's in effect. Proof that Trustees—dirty little PIs—are involved. Have you looked into them?"

"I've made inquiries."

Shell floated a laugh and nodded. The man in front of him wasn't the sort to commit an oversight. Boiled was much tougher and smarter than any bodyguard Shell had ever hired, and because of his effectiveness and broad remit his salary was also in a different league than his predecessors'.

During the war Boiled had been part of the elite Airborne Division and had participated in the invasion of the enemy's land across the sea as part of the Commonwealth's front line of troops. Whereas Shell had avoided conscription due to his mental disorder and had no experience of war. So Shell was extremely pleased with Boiled's past as a former soldier. Boiled was able to wipe away Shell's inferiority complex at not having been able to take part in the war and for this reason was seen by Shell as a most distinguished, talented man.

But at this point Boiled's face revealed a strange expression. An expression Shell had not yet seen. You could have even called it a troubled expression. Face the same, he spoke the PI's name:

"Oeufcoque-Penteano."

"An unusual name. Is he from the Continent? Did he defect over here during the war?"

"No, well—it's likely that the person who gave him his name did. But you couldn't really say that he's *from* anywhere."

"You know him, do you, this PI?"

"We were on the same team, a while ago."

Shell's expression turned to one of astonishment. But Boiled would go into no further detail.

"He can obtain legal clearance for all territories within a day. He's going to be exploiting his authority as a Trustee to the absolute fullest, gathering information on us. He may even have already sniffed out the details of this deal that you're working on."

"Or, equally, he may have taken an interest in this girl's case just so that he could get to me, right?" Shell said.

"A distinct possibility. I'm worried about the fact that this chatterbox of a mouse is suddenly so silent."

"Huh, calling your old partner a mouse. The partnership must have really ended badly."

Shell seemed somewhat amused. Boiled shook his head slowly and said, "No, he's a very professional mouse."

His face was serious.

Shell shrugged his shoulders. “I see.”

He ordered a third glass of gin and murmured *jackpot* before taking a sip.

“This is my game. I won’t let anyone interfere. A Life Preservation Program, you say? Well, if the program isn’t adopted then I’m guessing the PIs will lose their jurisdiction to *interfere*?”

“Indeed. If the person concerned were to die or otherwise disappear, the case would close unresolved; that would be quickest,” Boiled informed him blandly, and Shell smiled a satisfied smile at him before draining his gin.

“I’m relying on you. And it’s fairly certain that the doctors in question aren’t keen on the possibility that there are people other than me involved in the *jackpot*. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Sure.”

“You’re the ace in my sleeve, Boiled.”

Shell smiled a thin smile and rose from his seat. He moved with such composure that you would never know he had a PI on his heels. His eyes hid an air of decisiveness as he stared into the air.

Then Boiled said to Shell, with emphasis, “I need to hire. I need money.”

“Can’t you manage on your own? We’re talking about a girl who’s been cooked through and is now at death’s door in an ICU somewhere, right?”

Boiled shook his head at a surprised Shell. As if he were gently pacifying him.

“I need someone disposable. Like your past. Each time you discard your past you become sharper, like a razor. This is the same. I want to be absolutely sure.”

Shell made a broad gesture.

“Use one of our nest eggs. I’ll give you the key code later. I’ll be looking forward to receiving good news.”

And then, out of nowhere…

“It’s strange.”

Shell became serious and looked at one of his hands.

“When I was looking at the article, one of my fingers started throbbing—even though I couldn’t remember the girl. I must have been planning on *wearing* the girl on it. A new Blue Diamond. And yet…”

He rubbed the ring finger on his left hand,

“Was she really such a special girl that I was planning on wearing her on this finger? So special that I wanted to turn her into an engagement ring? Or was it just a passing fancy with no particular reason behind it?” he asked himself in a low voice. Boiled couldn’t answer. It wasn’t a question that anyone could answer.

“The memory of a woman—that’s always the first thing to go. It’s always the thing that stresses me out the most,” Shell said. “Women try to destroy my mind. Why’s that? They’re just women, right?”

Shell laughed as he spoke. A self-mocking laugh.

“All it takes is a twenty-gram bullet and a person will die,” Boiled whispered in a low voice.

Shell nodded and laughed sharply before putting his Chameleon Sunglasses on. The glasses that changed color with the passing of time were now a deep violet. Like the color of Shell’s pain. A forgetfulness that could never be undone. That sort of pain.

“Send me the *ring*. I’m counting on you.”

Shell finished speaking, then disappeared.

Boiled stared silently at the newspaper cutting on the counter.

"Looks like we'll be meeting again, Oeufcoque," he muttered in a subdued tone, out of Shell's earshot.

≡

The Doctor had just finished the last of his work on the display when Balot entered the office with Oeufcoque on her shoulder.

"Can we put off Balot's court appearance, do you think?" Oeufcoque asked in a surprisingly plain tone of voice.

The Doctor, taken aback, replied, "You're joking, right, Oeufcoque? You know what I've just done? Yes, of course, I've just finished transmitting the files of her conversation with the public prosecutor—along with the petition files—to the court secretariat. We've just had the preliminary courtroom proceedings over the monitor. That's like asking to put the egg back into the shell after it's broken."

"But the egg's not been fried yet."

The Doctor gave a strangled groan.

"Fine. So why not get the raw egg, the electronic data that's just finished dashing full-speed ahead toward the government offices, and tell it that, oh, actually we haven't decided how to cook you yet. Try doing that now at this late hour, eh?"

At this point the Doctor stopped moving. He stared fixedly at Balot's face.

"Really? Just like that?"

I don't believe it, his body seemed to say, as he stooped over the display to check the data that he had just sent not a minute ago. The contents of the files were empty. Pure white. Not even a destination address. Right next to them was a new set of entirely different files. He opened them and found the data—that he was sure he had just sent—copied and preserved exactly. It was like magic.

"The abilities that your *snarc* gives you are truly incredible."

The Doctor rose from his stooped posture and looked straight at Balot.

"There's no one I've known who's been able to manipulate electricity at this level. Or perhaps I should say no one has ever existed. The velocity of the electricity usually blows one's mind. In your case, even though almost your whole body is accelerated to such a high level, you're completely unaffected and it's working perfectly. Amazing. Still…"

Balot wouldn't raise her eyes. Her face was downcast, expressionless.

"Will you explain to me if there's any relation between the fact that, on the one hand, it's less than three hundred hours since your operation and you're defying the boundaries of your threshold of consciousness, and on the other hand you refuse to appear in court? Do you want to shut yourself away in this hideaway—this *shell*—forever?"

Balot shook her head sideways. In small, repeated movements. And that was the extent of her answer.

On her shoulder Oeufcoque looked at the Doctor with a troubled face.

“She’s like a mascot, isn’t she, Oeufcoque?”

The Doctor spoke in a severe tone of voice. Balot raised her eyes with a jolt. But in the corner of Balot’s field of vision Oeufcoque calmly shrugged his shoulders. He stood there as if to say that this was his job, to look like a charming little stuffed animal.

The Doctor sighed, tired.

“She’s nominated us as Trustees, with responsibility for this case. She has to give the courtroom a satisfactory account—and response—regarding what happened. Have you explained this to the girl properly? Unless we do this, we can’t take a step further, and all there is left to do is sit and wait for the enemy to send his assassins.”

At that moment there was a pinging noise. The doorbell-like sound that signaled the arrival of an incoming data packet.

The data packet he had mailed a minute ago had just bounced back, target address unknown.

The Doctor peered in at the display dubiously. And with his other hand he pushed his glasses up in surprise.

–I have nobody, nowhere.

The message floated up as a single line of text.

This was Balot’s response. As if to say that this was the one thing she knew for certain.

“You mean that you can’t trust us?”

The Doctor’s voice was much gentler than before. Not ingratiating, but as if to say that at last he understood where she was coming from.

Balot shook her head.

Another ping.

–I’m afraid.

The Doctor was about to say something. Then another pinging sound.

–I don’t want to be betrayed.

The unaddressed mail had these messages, one by one.

“By no means are we going to betray you. We’ll use all our power to help solve this case. That’s right, isn’t it, Oeufcoque? Whatever dangers we come across…”

But Oeufcoque wouldn’t answer. He merely stood there, face deeply troubled.

“Hey, say something, will you?”

Another ping.

–You were both peeping at me for ages.

The Doctor opened his mouth in surprise. A further chime.

–The two of you brought me back to life, then raped me.

The Doctor read this with an astonished expression, then sat back down in the chair, drained of strength.

“Raped?”

Balot hung her head in shame. It wasn’t like she was trying to forcefully impart a message—more like words hidden away in the depths of her heart were suddenly revealed.

“When I was accepted onto the government’s research team, I received a couple of hundred counseling sessions, and I started my research after having a profound respect for human rights bashed into me, along with a deep understanding of ethics and morality.”

The Doctor spoke as if he were wringing out his voice.

"Well, I drowned in that ocean of counseling and became completely impotent. As a result, I split up with my wife. Even now, I'm almost proud of my sexual inadequacy—it's like a badge of honor. There are even times when I start feeling like I've become a saint or something—"

"Erm, Doctor—"

Oeufcoque tried to interrupt, but the Doctor was having none of it.

"Very well. I'll now give you a full account of what happened to you."

The voice now showed a hint of anger, and Balot's shoulders flinched. But the Doctor was polite through to the end. You couldn't say he was calm and collected, but he showed no sign of needing to resort to more than words.

"In the first case, we made it our absolute priority to save your life. But there was no way of getting you from where you were to an emergency hospital. The enemy would have gotten wind of your whereabouts, and if you'd been in a hospital they would have come and finished you off. That's where a quack like me comes in. As I diagnosed it, a normal skin graft wouldn't have been anywhere near enough. You'd have met your maker long before your condition stabilized. And that's where my *craft* comes in. On this point I think we're in agreement, am I right?"

Balot gave a little nod. The Doctor was using plain words—not the slang of whores, or the affected language of posh princesses, but simple, direct language that hit Balot with everything she needed to know.

And that was good enough for Balot. The Doctor didn't notice that this was one of the reasons that Balot was sad—*it was good enough for the likes of her*—he was, after all, the Doctor, and his mind was on other things.

"In the second instance, in order to help you face up to the case that's now confronting us, we needed to make sure you had the ability to *resist*. Now, shall we have Oeufcoque give his testimony at this point?"

He pointed at Oeufcoque as if to say that he wasn't the only villain in the piece.

Oeufcoque raised his hands and with noticeable reluctance carried on with the Doctor's explanation.

"All right, Doc. My *response*. We could have handed you over to the care of the public bodies in charge of protection, but we wouldn't have been able to tell if any assassins had infiltrated them. There are those within the police forces who almost look upon that sort of thing as a second job. And so we deemed it appropriate that we keep on guarding you while you developed your own powers of resistance."

A pinging sound.

–Powers of resistance?

"Yeah, well, fighting strength, as it were. Learn self-defense skills, how to use a gun, that sort of—"

Another pinging sound.

–No way. I don't want to become like a soldier.

Oeufcoque gave a little shrug of his shoulders. That was the last reply.

The display was now buried in Balot's words.

The Doctor turned to the display and nimbly took the files one by one and collated them in a single file to be saved. Balot's eyes followed the Doctor's actions with a quick glance. She thought her words would be deleted, but the Doctor just carried on reading them.

"While you were unconscious we brushed on the memories in your brain's outer threshold of

consciousness," the Doctor said, face still turned to the display.

"We're not talking about tangible memories here, but rather your subconscious—we took all our technology and planning and threw it all together, and had the computer interrogate the mix. It's one of the protocols used with patients in a vegetative state in order to decide whether or not to euthanize them. So we looked at the results after the prescribed six hours of interrogation, and then while you were asleep we conducted another six-hour interrogation. The results were the same on both occasions." The Doctor wasn't shouting now. He was informing her calmly, as if he were reciting a poem.

"Your current body—and this situation—this is the result that you chose."

There was a short gap in the conversation, but before long there was another ping right before the Doctor's eyes.

–I know that excuse. You men are all the same. "It's what you wanted, you were asking for it." That's what you always say.

Balot stared nervously at the Doctor's profile as she watched him read the sentence. Keenly. With the same expression as when she said that she didn't want to be betrayed. Oeufcoque had placed a little paw on the base of Balot's neck, as if to praise her for her bravery.

"That counseling…like a tsunami…" the Doctor muttered without thinking. As if he were remembering anew what he had gained and what he had lost. The meaning of the phrase that he'd said to Balot, *everything turned topsy-turvy*.

An almost diffident sound pinged before the Doctor's eyes.

–I also know that you people aren't lying.

The Doctor took this, and her earlier words, and stuck them into the file he had opened. As if he were scooping up her words. Then he turned back to Oeufcoque and said, "Now then, I'll leave this bit up to your heart, Oeufcoque. I've been doing the *maintenance* on your guts all these years, after all. We'll use its beat as a barometer."

His facial expression was calm but also a little twisted.

"I know what *needs to be done*, but I don't know what we *should* do. In particular when it comes to rebuilding the body of a fifteen-year-old girl and getting her to stand in front of a court."

A pinging sound, and,

–Rune-Balot.

"Hmm. That's your name. It's been a while since we've called the person involved in a *Scramble 09* case by their proper name. Rune-Balot. You're competent enough to be able to give informed consent to your doctor. So, right now, what do you want to do?"

Again Balot's head was bowed, eyes downcast.

The Doctor showed no particular sign of getting impatient but sat back in his chair and looked at Oeufcoque.

"The clothes Balot just ordered online have arrived."

Oeufcoque answered in her place, meekly.

The Doctor raised both hands as if to say *so*? Balot hesitantly tugged at the hem of the hospital robe that she'd been wearing since she emerged from the insulator.

"And she wants to try them on and head outside. For lunch. And at the same time file a petition to have her manipulated ID canceled."

The Doctor's mouth twisted.

"So you weren't particularly hiding away, then? Why didn't you say so?"

Balot cowered, but the Doctor was just looking to Oeufcoque for confirmation.

"And I suppose you're going with her, right? In an *I'm your bulletproof armor* kind of way? But take care, though. The preliminary report for the case is already out there. There's a good chance the enemy will try something."

"Well, it'd be good to have an opponent she could try out her new powers on. In any case, she's yet to experience my *usefulness* when it comes to dealing with *Scramble 09* cases."

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders and stood up. He took out a card carrier from his back pocket.

He chose a cash card and handed it to Balot.

Balot had no idea what to do.

She stared at the Doctor's face before almost secretively taking it from his hand.

"The application to the Broilerhouse for your social security compensation has already gone in, but it takes a bit of time for the approval to come through. So, in the meantime, this is your property. Ask Oeufcoque for the PIN, I don't know it."

No man had ever given her money in this way before. Balot stared at the Doctor's face with trepidation. The Doctor suddenly turned serious.

"Indeed. So. Looks like this is going to be the first test of your abilities. It's certainly worth doing before we go to the courtroom, I suppose. I'm praying that you'll be able to *use* Oeufcoque well without *abusing* him."

Balot didn't understand the Doctor's words. She just looked at Oeufcoque, still perched on her shoulder. This mouse had listened to her heart in a way no one ever had before. And with a precision that no counselor could ever hope to match. There were still loads of things she wanted to talk about and countless things she wanted him to understand.

Right now, that was everything to Balot.

Balot returned to the room she had been allocated—the old morgue—and opened up the packages one by one, laying their contents out on the bed. She lifted up black leather and placed it against her skin. It was a rather snug little outfit. No skirt, but shorts.

Oeufcoque stared at the outfit, nonplussed.

"Ah…" he exclaimed, rather unenthusiastically.

Balot shrugged her shoulders and showed him the next outfit. This time they were normal pants, the blouse sleeveless, and Balot indicated by gesturing that she would add arm-warmers to it.

"Um, yeah… You know what, Balot, I'll wait in the Doctor's room. Come and get me when you're finished."

After speaking Oeufcoque jumped off the desk and walked to the door on his two feet.

When he was directly below the doorknob he leapt up—quite a jump for a mouse—and turned the knob, opening the door. He landed and was about to walk out of the room when Balot pinched the suspenders holding up his pants and hoisted him into the air.

"I'm not really one to ask for advice on feminine aesthetics, you know. And I'm not too keen on being called a Peeping Tom again…" Oeufcoque said somewhat miserably.

Balot pursed her lips and closed the door, putting Oeufcoque onto the bed.

She then took some clothes and ran into the bathroom with them. After a while Oeufcoque

stood up and got off the bed, and just then the bathroom door opened. Still in her underwear she gestured at Oeufcoque to stay put. Her face showed unease rather than anger. Like when she said she was afraid at the display on the Doctor's desk.

"Fine, fine. I'll wait—no, stand guard—here. Don't you worry."

Balot still looked a little anxious, but she carried on and closed the bathroom door anyway.

"You'd be able to sense what was happening on this side of the door, you know. You're still very insecure because you're uncomfortable with your new powers, I suppose. Or no, maybe that's why you're so anxious—it's your new powers that bring home the fact that no one is there," Oeufcoque muttered, grumbling, and flopped down on his side. He gazed at the ceiling for a while, and then Balot was staring down at him.

Balot was wearing a black outfit. Her neckline—and just below it—were exposed, and her hair hung straight down. Her hair was newly grown—regenerated by the Doctor from the remnants of her old hair—so she didn't tie her hair up or else a lot of it would have fallen out. The sleeves extended to her fingertips, covering the backs of her hands with triangular pieces of cloth, her middle fingers jutting through holes in the fabric. Underneath the shorts the stockings covered her legs perfectly, and she staggered unsteadily in her knee-high boots toward an abruptly rising Oeufcoque, twisting her body from left to right. Oeufcoque searched for the right words, but all he could come up with was, "I think it's nice."

Then, craning his neck: "Not too tight?"

When Balot heard this, she squeezed both arms together. Her attitude suggested that she preferred a snug fit. She looked like someone was hugging her, warmly. She took some fashion belts from the packages and fastened a few tightly around her hips and stomach and also her legs. Over this she put on a leather jacket. She looked like she was bound from head to toe. As if she would be snatched away if she didn't wrap up tight.

She dropped in on the Doctor before leaving the building.

"Hmm… I like to think that my own doctor's whites are something special, but I think I may have met my match with your outfit."

Balot scowled a little at the Doctor's honesty.

"It looks like we're in for a chilly night tonight. Don't get caught out just because spring's begun. And make sure you take your medicine with you. There are still a few places where your cortex hasn't completely stabilized."

Balot made a gesture in front of her outfit. *I'm plenty warm enough*, she seemed to say. Then she patted her pockets. Like a child wordlessly answers a nagging parent.

"Well then, shall we head off?"

Oeufcoque, on Balot's shoulder, changed his shape with a squelch. He *turned* into a velvet choker and wrapped himself around Balot's neck, then extruded the shape of a piece of metal.

Not so much a pendant as a dog tag.

Balot touched this, entwined it in her fingers as if she were meditating on it. When she let go the piece of metal had become an egg-shaped piece of crystal, and from inside it a gold-colored mouse winked.

The Doctor looked at the pendant with a complex expression.

"Our current client seems to be very good at telling us how things should be, doesn't she?"

"Well, it's good that we're flexible enough to offer a variety of different services…"

Oeufcoque's voice, serious to the last.

“Can we reconfirm that we have all our necessary documents, Doctor? And can you let the public prosecutor know about our deferred court appearance? There’s always the possibility of doing it by proxy, but the question is whether that would be enough to get the Broilerhouse moving.”

“The court doesn’t move according to an individual’s convenience, you know. It’s a power game—and a money game—run by the letter of the law.”

“Yes, and I’m not about to start playing a game that goes against the interests of the Concerned Party in this case.”

“Sure, sure. Well, I’ll look for something constructive to do.”

“Sorry about earlier.” The voice sounded a bit different now. In tone, if not timbre.

“Uh, in what way?”

“I hurt your feelings. But thank you. And I’ll be sure to pay you back your money.”

“Um…more importantly than that, would you mind not using Oeufcoque’s voice when you’re speaking? It’s pretty disconcerting.”

Balot touched the crystal with her hand.

–I can’t remember what my own voice sounds like.

She made a sound much more high-pitched than Oeufcoque’s voice. She opened her mouth and took a wheezy breath. Like a draft in a wind tunnel.

“She’ll get it back one step at a time, you’ll see. Step by step.” This time it was the real Oeufcoque who spoke, in his real voice.

02

Balot took one step out of the doorway and stood still. She looked petrified.

She closed her eyes and felt the sunlight, read her surroundings with her body. There were no disruptions in the surrounding air.

No men appeared to be waiting at the bend in the road, ready to ambush her.

From beyond the buildings in the distance that intersected like a chess board, she heard the noise of a gasoline-powered car.

Everything was different from anything Balot had ever before experienced.

It was different from the time she'd lived in the industrial quarter of the harbor town where she grew up, and different again from when she'd arrived in Mardock City 170 miles to the north. The time in her life she was allowed to receive money, and the time when she wasn't.

"Let's go straight to the main street. We can hire an electric car," Oeufcoque said from her neckline.

Balot opened her eyes. She started walking, head bowed at first, but soon she lifted her chin. The sidewalk was clean and tidy, with manicured lawns on either side of the street. It really didn't look like the sort of place in which you'd expect to find a morgue.

After a short walk she came to a small shopping mall. A hardware store, a computer shop, a dressmaker, a café, and a vegetable market—all were immaculately kept.

She arrived at a large intersection and was assaulted by dizziness. Her attention had been focused on the insides of the buildings, and she hadn't realized that she was in such a big place. She stopped on the sidewalk for a while, considering what the best thing was to do. She soon decided. She set her own personal boundary. A field of recognition.

A circle of roughly fifteen meters in diameter. That was Balot's personal space.

"That's it. You can hire cars from the kiosk in front of you."

There was a car kiosk on the other side of the intersection. Balot crossed at the green light—*walk*—and halted underneath the red light—*stop*. Without looking at them she could feel the inner workings of the traffic lights. She comprehended them fully, down to the fact that they moved like clockwork, never missing a beat.

Balot gently brushed against the pillar supporting the traffic lights. She gently interfered—*snarced* the signals.

The signals on the traffic lights quickened. Seeing the light had started flashing, pedestrians sped up, flustered. The gas-powered car stopped with a loud noise, and the driver looked up at the light with a surprised expression.

Balot crossed the road. Oeufcoque said nothing.

There was a billboard for eCar Rentals. Just below was a sign: MINIMUM AGE 14 YEARS. Balot stared at the phrase. MINIMUM AGE 14 YEARS. She was a little surprised at the fact that she indeed qualified. Fifteen had snuck up on her. And she was still fifteen.

"What is it?" Oeufcoque asked. Not knowing what to answer she just shook her head.

On the other side of a thick layer of bulletproof glass, the shopkeeper sat reading a magazine.

"How can I help?"

He looked at her carefully. Balot pointed at the rental sign and touched the crystal at her neck.

–A red car, please. I'm fifteen.

Balot spoke like a machine, lips tightly sealed, and the shopkeeper watched her with a vague expression before speaking.

"We also have a car suitable for the disabled. What do you think? You get free parking with those too."

Balot gave a small nod and stuck her cash card in the window.

"Your signature."

Rune-Balot, she wrote on the blank form that she was given. Oeufcoque secretly whispered the address in Balot's ear. It was obviously not the address of their hideaway. *It's a decoy address*, Oeufcoque said.

"If anything happens, press the emergency button. You can use a telephone?"

–Yes, I'll be fine.

This time her voice was unnaturally high. The shopkeeper looked a little concerned.

"It'd be swell if it didn't come back broken, that car. And if you encounter any trouble I'd appreciate it if the blame didn't come back to—"

–I'll be fine.

She adjusted the voice so that it had as calming an effect as possible. The shopkeeper gave her the obligatory lecture about fastening her seat belt as he handed over the keys.

The car was a two-seater, with space for luggage in the back. As she turned the keys the Nav, the in-car navigation system, started up and offered a list of possible routes to take.

It was touch-screen activated, but Balot didn't touch anywhere.

She sensed the car's structure and *applied* her will. There was no steering wheel or mirrors, and the only things that were adjustable were the destination and the speed—and even the speed was limited by the eCar regulations. There was a stereo and TV, and the TV started up automatically with a sightseeing guide. She turned it off and put the stereo on.

The car pulled out into the intersection, accompanied by an uplifting tune. Warm rays of sun filled the car, and having commandeered the Nav, she traveled down the road for a while before pulling up at a red light.

Balot looked through the windshield at the traffic lights. She could easily *snarc* them from here…

"Stop it, Balot."

Balot stiffened under Oeufcoque's sudden words of restraint.

"Are you being threatened by the traffic lights at the moment? To the extent that you feel your life is in danger?"

His voice was strict. Balot gnawed on her lips. Cheerful music was still playing.

–Why didn't you stop me earlier?

She asked directly through the car speakers without using Oeufcoque's body. She sounded somewhat vexed.

"I was observing your self-restraint. Ideally your powers should be used purely for self-defense. One of the reasons I gave the go-ahead for this little excursion was in order to have you learn this for yourself."

Balot looked sullen. The lights changed and Balot raised the speed. Right up to the limit.

She tried to lift the electronic restraint on the car, and found she could, increasing the speed further and further.

"What about your seat belt? You want to drive the car at full speed, have some fun? Then let's set our course for a theme park. There's this fighter plane game where you can experience Mach 2."

–Why are you suddenly being nice to me again?

"Because I want you to obey the rules—and to learn to choose for yourself which rules are *worth* obeying."

Obey the rules—those words again. Balot swung her head back. She really didn't want Oeufcoque to be telling her this.

–But you lied when you gave a false address. Is it right to lie?

"It's a perfectly legitimate forwarding address. There's an apartment and a postal address there. It's just set up so that no one can tell who lives there."

–Are you angry with me? Because I tampered with the traffic lights?

"No, not angry. It'd take more than fiddling with some lights to make me angry. Even if we'd been hit by a car, it'd be you who was hurt, not me. Even if someone died as a result of your actions I'm sure no one would be able to work out the cause of the accident, and I wouldn't turn you in. And even if there was then *another* similar accident, well, I'd give you a good cross-examining, but I still wouldn't be angry. Just sad."

–I just got a bit carried away. Don't get so mad at me. I was enjoying our shopping trip.

"I just want you to promise. About using your abilities in ways that could hurt innocent bystanders. You don't want to throw away your rights to use your *Scramble 09* powers, right?"

–I won't do it again. I'll think before I do anything. Don't be mad at me.

"I'm not mad at you. You've got such incredible aptitude. I was surprised by your manipulation of the traffic lights. They're specifically designed so that they *can't* be controlled remotely, at least not easily. You're full of surprises."

–Don't put it like that.

"Okay, okay, sorry."

–I'll promise.

"Sure. And for my part, I've no desire to make you obey any arbitrary rules."

Oeufcoque spoke in a soothing voice.

"In other words, when I'm telling you *no*, I'm talking about a fairly basic precept when it comes to using your powers. It's also something that will protect you. And, similarly, if I tell you not to do something then I won't be doing it either. Absolutely not. As a basic precondition for my being with you. This is the deal between us—do you understand?"

At that moment, out of nowhere, she remembered the Doctor's words. Balot had *chosen* her current body, *chosen* her circumstances. This was part of the answer to the question—*Why me?*—it was, she thought, an established fact.

Balot gripped the crystal. Not to *snarc* it. She just held it tight.

After that she put on her seat belt and reduced the speed of the car.

The car now entered a district filled with clusters of tourist shops and was about to settle at the base of the imposing Trump Tower. Balot *snarced* the car and changed its destination to the East Side.

The harbor drew near, and both the sidewalks and the roads started to grow more congested.

All around her were gasoline-powered cars, and among the proliferating shopping malls of the Cheap Branchers—the middle classes—she found the flea market.

Now and then men would wolf-whistle at Balot, seeing her in the car alone, but they showed no signs of advancing on her, guns in hand, grinning maniacally.

Balot opened the window and sniffed the air, which carried a hint of brine.

Eventually the car came to a stop in a designated car park for rental cars.

As she got out of the car and started walking, she came across a gathering of obviously able-bodied teenagers who had parked their gas-powered cars in the free spaces designated for vehicles with placards for the handicapped.

As she walked past Balot *snarced* the gate of the parking lot. The teenagers looked on in horror as the gate slammed shut. As one, their faces turned to the emergency aid button. Faces that were silently calculating the fines they would have to pay for being caught using the handicapped spaces without a permit.

–Well, you've got to obey the rules, right? Balot asked through the crystal, using a silent, electronic signal.

"Uh, yeah."

Oeufcoque seemed about to say something else, but in the end that was all he said.

The mall was bustling, and a fresh breeze blew through the arcade.

The people were coming and going purposefully, and the occasional pair of Hunters—the city police—walked past on patrol, but they showed no sign of looking for an easy target to beat up. Rather, they too walked with a sense of purpose, and there was no particular scent of anyone on this street looking to find any sort of warped pleasure.

Responding to her surroundings, Balot put on a purposeful expression and started walking. Her heels clicked along as if she were testing them out, feeling their sensation, and Oeufcoque called out to her, "Let's get some papers. It's hard to keep track of what you've spent when you're using a card."

Like a dad. He wasn't going to buy anything. Just cast a watchful eye over *her* purchases.

They found a nearby ATM and used the card to draw out a wad of notes.

Twenty twenty-dollar bills. The amount Oeufcoque specified. She was worried that this might be too much and wanted to take fewer than ten, but Oeufcoque said that she would be better off having a few nerves to keep her on her toes, so she did as he said.

She folded the crisp new bills in half and crammed them into her card holder. She put one bill in her jacket pocket and deliberately scrunched it up. As if to say *This is all I have.*

She bought a bag from a stall inside the mall using this bill. Seeing the crumpled note the shopkeeper threw in a cheap leather wallet, giving it to her along with her change at no charge.

Balot meekly obeyed the rules of the street.

She transferred the bills from her card holder to the wallet in the shadow of a building and put them away in her bag, and now, instead of scrunching up another bill, she captured the movements of all people within a fifteen-meter radius.

She wore her bag diagonally over her shoulder and then put her jacket on over it in order to protect it from purse snatchers.

Now all she had to do was think about what she wanted to put in the bag.

She bought some toiletries and sanitary napkins at the drugstore. She bought some handkerchiefs and hairpins, then wandered aimlessly through the mall. Clothes and shoes, jewelry,

electronics, ethnic goods. She examined the handicrafts and souvenirs as she chatted with Oeufcoque about nothing in particular. *That frame doesn't suit the picture*, or *you could make one of those using my body as a mold*, that sort of thing.

"Aren't you starting to get hungry?" Oeufcoque asked. He'd been keeping track of Balot's biorhythm. He had constant tabs on her pulse, and at the same time was checking the surroundings to make sure there was no danger.

–Can I eat whatever I want?

"Of course. I was asking for you. I don't really need much, after all."

They had a quick look at a plan of the mall attached to a public telephone, looking for the entries for food and drink stalls, and found a block of open-air food carts. Balot headed in that direction.

Without having to walk for too long she saw a row of carts linked together all serving colonial food.

There were white plastic tables and chairs in a courtyard, and Balot went up to the tableware section and took a disposable tray before heading over to some of the stalls. The place was a real salad bowl of races, and anyone working at the stalls could handle a number of different languages. They picked them up naturally in the course of business with various different customers, and were also used to communicating even when they couldn't understand a word of what the other person was saying.

Balot took her tray, laden with paper plates full of food, and found a seat.

Her main dish was a plate of Tick Noodles smothered in red Charlie Sauce. It contained boiled squid and chunky slices of vegetables. She'd also bought a dish of deep-fried fish slices and chilled whole fish on the bone.

"You're pretty good at that, aren't you?"

Oeufcoque watched with admiration as Balot skillfully used her chopsticks.

"Chopsticks have always been a mystery to me—I've never understood why people go out of their way to turn one piece of cutlery into two smaller pieces."

Balot sifted through the fish with her chopsticks. She elegantly separated the bones from the flesh, forming two piles.

–I was always the best at this. The other girls used to say I was handy.

She transmitted the words to Oeufcoque electronically as she ate. Well, wasn't this convenient? She could eat and talk at the same time.

–I think I'd probably be good at excavating fossils, that sort of thing.

"Is that something you're interested in going into in the future?"

–I'd like to, but maybe I'm saying that because it's the only thing I can think of that's at all related to my skills.

Balot started thinking about the things that had died such a long time ago. Things that had been buried underground for many years, slowly turning to stone. Things long since forgotten. Why did they then have to be dug up again?

–I don't really know.

Oeufcoque changed the subject. "Isn't it about time for your medication?"

Balot tidied her tray away and went to the self-service water cooler to take the medicine the Doctor had given her. Skin stabilizers, hair growth agents, medicine to fix her eyelashes, vitamins,

calcium tablets. Lots of things she had to take—and she took them all.

As she swallowed her medicine she thought about the fossils. One fossil in particular. A swirling shell. What were those things called that stayed hidden in their shells except for their moplike hands and feet that they used to crawl along the seabed?

"Ammonite or something, that sort of thing, wasn't it?" Oeufcoque answered conscientiously when asked.

After she'd walked through the mall for a while, she did indeed come across a collection of spirals.

They were in the form of some computer graphics projected onto the wall of a building. Balot stopped in front of the stall that sold them.

The shop sold Eject Posters. Small square boxes that, when fitted to a wall, would project images onto the space just below. There were a number of patterns lined up in a row, and there was a memory card that contained over a hundred different pictures of fossils.

"Why not buy something that takes your fancy? It'd be a pleasant diversion, and the decor in your room is pretty dull," said Oeufcoque.

Balot took advantage of his offer. She bought an Eject Poster and a card with the fossils on it, then walked on, eyes on the instruction manual. Computer simulations of live ammonites, nautiluses, trilobites, along with photographs of the fossilized creatures, mixed with other minerals and fossilized into spirals of silver and gold and crystal.

After a while she put it away in her bag. She was somehow excited.

–Is it okay if I buy a few things I like?

"Of course."

Balot went to the stationery section of a department store and bought a PDA—the sort a child might use—and six different types of colored markers. And she bought some lipstick that caught her eye in a shop that she happened to pass by. Because she liked its bright poppy red and the design of the case.

As she went around the department store she felt more and more that she and Oeufcoque were becoming one.

No matter where they went they were as one. Like the mojo, that protective charm so often sung about in the blues.

But there was a moment when Oeufcoque resisted.

"Stop, Balot. I'll be waiting outside, so…"

The pendant *turned* back into the form of a golden mouse with a squelch and jumped straight off Balot's shoulders. Balot correctly read his path of flight and plucked him up by his suspenders midflight.

"I've already said, haven't I? That I don't want to be called a Peeping Tom?"

He spoke so pitifully that she *snarced* him, making him turn into an alarm bell. A poppy-red alarm bell. She looked around to check that no one was watching before sticking it on the wall with a fluid movement.

"I'll keep an eye out for you, so off you go."

He spoke as if to a child who was scared of the dark.

Balot went into the women's restroom.

The toilets were clean and empty. She went into the stall at the very end, loosened her belt, and lowered first her shorts, then tights and underwear, down to her knees, layer by layer.

Relief and anxiety assaulted her in equal measure as her lower body was freed from its wrapping.

She sat down on the toilet seat and took some ointment from her jacket pocket. She squirted some bright white hydration cream on her palm and rubbed it on her stomach and thighs. These were the only parts that were still rough, still scabbed.

As she rubbed the cream into her skin it started peeling off, like the thin membrane of a boiled egg. She brushed the skin off and rubbed the remaining cream on her shoulders and elbows.

She sat on the toilet, waiting to pee. She stared absentmindedly at the linoleum wall with not a single piece of graffiti.

All of a sudden she felt that something was not quite right. As she did her business she thought about why she might be feeling this way.

Her urine smelled of medicine. A result of the eighteen different pills she had to take every day.

Not a single one of those was a tranquilizer—the Doctor himself was surprised by this fact.

Your psyche is incredibly tenacious—the Doctor was full of admiration. But Balot thought that, in all honesty, if medication could make her mind even tougher then so much the better, and she should be taking as much as she could handle.

Even after she had finished on the toilet, washed herself with the bidet, and flushed all the evidence away, there was still a faint smell of medicine in the air. She fixed her clothes and fastened her belt even tighter than before.

Then she put her mind to her earlier feeling that something was out of place.

She soon discovered why—a plastic bubble fixed to the tank that connected the toilet to the flush button. She gave the bubble a wrench and it came off easily, and, shaking it, a tiny fingertip-sized camera emerged.

Balot expanded her consciousness and interfered with the camera's magnetic field, *snarcing* it.

The two hundred hours of continuous footage stored in the camera's many microchips was replaced bit by bit by images of the department store's mascot doll waving into the camera. As if someone wearing the doll costume was looking into the camera and waving for all eternity.

Balot then put the camera back and took the lipstick from her bag.

A LITTLE HORROR SHOW

She wrote on the wall right next to the bubble. And then she added this:

WARNING

Balot left the booth. *Purely for self-defense,* she murmured to herself as she washed her hands.

But the department store wasn't about to stop its dirty tricks just because she revealed the existence of a camera. Balot knew this fact all too well. Bribes given to the cleaners and security guards.

She even knew all about the money paid to the shills, the women who ostentatiously "bought" the most expensive items on display in order to encourage real customers to spend more.

She knew everything, right down to how much they were paid.

03

As she emerged from the toilet, the alarm bell squooged into the shape of a mouse and jumped onto Balot's shoulder. Without missing a beat he ran to her neck and became a choker complete with crystal pendant.

"You took your sweet time."

–Don't blame me, blame the Peeping Tom.

"Look, I…"

–Not you. There was a camera in the ladies' room. I just fixed it up a little.

"Camera?" Oeufcoque thought about this for a while before it clicked. "You mean illegal cameras set up in order to get close-up footage of women's bodies?"

–But do you really understand? What that means to me?

"Well, I think I know how you feel, at least. Right now you're angry. Very angry. And irritated and also embarrassed. Mortified. That's what you smell of, anyway."

–Smell?

"Body odor. A mouse like me can read emotions through body odor. Didn't you know?"

Balot squeezed the crystal tightly and started prodding it with her fingertips. Violently. And full of grief.

And then Oeufcoque did indeed understand Balot's feelings.

"Oh, sure, sorry. If I'm absolutely honest I can't tell *exactly* how you're feeling. I don't really have the imagination to comprehend it. I'm not a woman, after all, or even a human."

Balot found that her feelings were calmed down somewhat by Oeufcoque's words.

–I think you're kinder than a human, and more humble too.

Oeufcoque was now attuned to Balot's change of heart, as if he were sniffing everything up. He noticed the chemicals secreted from her skin, the change in her pulse, and most of all the change in atmosphere.

"There's a café just above us. We should be able to get some work done there."

The Internet café that Oeufcoque was talking about was on the top floor of the department store.

They could see the harbor city sprawled out in a mess down below and farther in the distance the thin line of the sea.

The seats were set a comfortable distance apart, perfect for getting down to some work.

When the waiter came over to take her order, Balot ordered a cappuccino by pointing at the menu, and then opened up the laptop-style monitor embedded in the table.

She was about to connect to the net but then she stopped herself.

–Do you mind if we talk for a while about my new hobby?

They'd completely forgotten about this since the spy camera incident. Oeufcoque cheerfully agreed.

Balot took her PDA from her bag and lined up the six colors of markers alongside the instruction booklet for the CG fossils. She chose the yellow and marked one of the words in the heading of the manual.

Then she *snarced* the PDA and brought up the word that she had just highlighted. The name of a

large spiral-shaped shell. As she read the manual she entered a rough commentary into the PDA, adding her personal impressions. *The same color as agate*, or *If these were still alive I'd like one as a pet*, that sort of thing.

–I'm going to make a dictionary. My own original.

"Brilliant. When you grow up you could become a linguist, or a poet."

–Well, I always wanted to go to school and have a dictionary like everyone else. The sort of school that children like me go to. So this is instead of that. My own self-study classroom.

"And you could still go to school. As soon as this case is closed we'll apply for re-enrollment."

–Won't work. You need both your parents' signatures, Balot replied, bluntly.

–Children who don't have any get put in the Welfare Institute. I don't want to go back there.

"But aren't both your parents still alive?"

–They don't think of me as a child. Not their child, anyway.

She informed him of this without stopping her hand that was holding the marker. Wordlessly. As an electronic signal.

Balot stopped writing only when the young waiter came over to bring her the drink she'd ordered.

"Is it a report you're working on, miss? For school?" the waiter asked. Balot nodded ambiguously. The waiter laughed, showing the whites of his teeth. He pointed at the monitor on the table.

"You can look up almost anything on this thing. This café has access rights to the library, you see. The official time limit is two hours. But if you want an extension, just let me know. I might be able to sneak you one."

Balot touched her choker so that the young waiter could understand her next words:

–Thank you. If I need an extension I'll be sure to ask.

The mechanical sound she produced to answer him caused the waiter's face to stiffen very slightly.

At least the waiter was a straightforward enough young man. He wasn't the sort to start thinking in terms of *If you took the device on her throat away from her she wouldn't be able to speak.*

Instead, he inevitably came to a different conclusion. He shrugged his shoulders and stood there somewhat embarrassed, as if he had accidentally offended her in some way.

Balot put the things that were out on the table back into her bag. The waiter watched this before eventually being called away to attend to another customer. He wasn't a bad youth. It was just a question of pride. The youth's, and Balot's.

–Let's get down to some work, said Balot.

Oeufcoque *turned* with a squish into a mouse and jumped on top of the table. Checking that the waiter wasn't looking his way he made another turn, this time into a plug-in adaptor device for a computer.

"Try me out."

She took a cord from the side of the monitor that up until that moment had been showing a floor plan of the department store, and in a moment the screen went fuzzy.

Through Oeufcoque's efforts they connected from the store's secure net navigation to the much wider-ranging user services of the outside world.

"Through the Broilerhouse, we've managed to suppress your personal information that Shell-Septinos forged. In particular, any attempt to hack into your residential ID is now a serious crime. For access privileges you need thirteen different types of password combined with a physical key —in other words, we've made it so that no one has access to your personal data without me."

As she watched the screen in front of her being decoded layer by layer, she suddenly remembered the rooms in the hideaway. The room that you could lock from the inside at night.

There were two locks on it. One was the electronic sort on the door knob, and the Doctor could also open this from the outside. The other was a chain, and this was purely Balot's. Of course, both Balot and the Doctor knew too well how little use a chain on a door was in this city.

But this chain is made of a special alloy and a unique textile, the Doctor said. *It can't be broken easily. Definitely not. Because Oeufcoque made it himself.* That comforted Balot. A chain that was *Made by Oeufcoque*. The chain caused the door to close perfectly, with no gaps or cracks.

"Right, I'm now about to check the entries one by one. Okay?"

Balot placed her hand on the adaptor. She thought she could feel Oeufcoque's pulse in her palm.

–Okay.

She took a deep breath, then *snarced* Oeufcoque.

The truth was unbearable. She hadn't realized just how much her life had been graffitied over.

Her birthplace, date of birth, names of her parents, family tree, personal history, address, telephone number, usage records for her cash card, log of her access to the net, questionnaires from department stores and online shops, mailing data, contents of letters to her friends.

All lies. She realized just how abnormal this Shell-Septinos must be to manipulate another person's existence according to his whim in such precise, meticulous detail.

And moreover, this wasn't just any old graffiti: it was beautifully done.

It was a cruel veneer, as if to emphasize the ugliness of the original, of what had gone before.

Oeufcoque highlighted certain entries on the monitor from various pages, and each time he did so Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque and made a separate copy—with her true details added—into individual reference files.

Like unearthing fossils from underneath a beautiful display of ostentation.

Balot tried to remember the first time—and indeed the last time—that she had accessed the data. The very act that triggered the events that caused Shell to burn her to death. Was she grateful to the man who had made such a vainglorious display of her? How pathetic if she was. It was like taking a file to her heart surrounded by the perfect shell.

According to this data, Balot was currently nineteen years old. She was from a middle-class family, and if you had to use one word to describe her it would have been *wholesome*. There was no trace of an incident in which her brother was sent to prison for beating her father so badly he was left with permanent damage. There was no sign of an incident in which ADSOM—the Alcohol and Drug abuse Society of Mardock City—put a cap on her mother's pregnancy rights, meaning that IVF was the only route open to her, which in turn led to a cycle of abuse driven by the inferiority complex this had given the woman.

Here, her father was a salaryman, an average office Joe. He wasn't driven to extreme neurosis

thanks to backbreaking manual labor, and the despair that he was plunged into after losing his job didn't cause him to cling to Balot and take her virginity as if she were just another woman. Balot had been able to go to school properly, and she wasn't subjected to sexual abuse by Social Services. And it certainly wasn't the case that, after she had escaped from the institute along with a few others, she was forced into the even harsher position of having to sell her body and soul piece by piece.

A dream family—a dream life. Not a life in the depths of despair and hatred, where the tears had run dry.

"I'm starting to see it now—I'm beginning to understand what Shell was plotting with all his evil business with you," Oeufcoque said. Even as they confirmed Balot's personal details Balot and Oeufcoque both sped through the huge network, collecting any other relevant data.

"As I suspected, that man has his fingers in a number of different pies—illegal banking. According to his personal data he's bought over 170,000 different items in the past six months. The data is fictional, of course, and no transactions will have taken place. The question is where the money has gone."

Balot felt her bile rising when she heard Oeufcoque's words.

"So, he gives you your forged status and arranges it to look like you've embezzled money. It's written here that you're an employee at this bank. The bank in question is closely connected with Shell's masters, OctoberCorp, and certain government officials are involved too. First, he entered details of fake deposit accounts into the computer, complete with forged certificates of deposit. Under your name, the fake one, of course. And as long as your records are never accessed, they never come under any official scrutiny. That's the key point. And the moment you accessed your file, many of the official procedures started automatically."

The official procedures started automatically. One of the procedures being Balot's death.

Why was she killed—*why me?* Another part of the answer to this question floated before her eyes, and Balot felt her whole body enveloped in a wave of hatred she'd never experienced before.

"So, they get your fake documents, add some fake wage slips, and drain this from the non-bank they set up specially for the purpose. We're talking millions of dollars. It takes time, though, for the funds to be cleared. If our case is recognized as legitimate within the next week then we—and the public prosecutor—will be given leave to investigate further… I get it now, *this* is where Shell's brain becomes so important. It's likely that a ream of his memories have already disappeared. *Psychelaundering* rather than money laundering. So, while the legal investigation into his memory takes place, it's too late for the investigation into the funds to go any further."

Balot inhaled slowly. As her heartbeat started to settle, the hatred flowing around her became one with her flesh and blood, and she felt it silently beating away.

"Once the payments have gone through, as long as the memory of this case is completely wiped from Shell's brain, there's nothing more we can do. Although, on the other hand—if Shell's memories *are* preserved somewhere…"

Balot didn't yet understand in full the complexities of Shell's scheme, but she did understand that she herself had started the ball rolling toward the events that would bring about her own death.

Or rather, Shell had known that Balot would start the ball rolling.

There was no one in her circumstance who couldn't be aware of just how much they were

being used, of *what* they were being used as.

In the end the petition that they collected together to send in to the Broilerhouse ran to a total of 280 counts of status fraud.

While they were doing that, Balot ordered another cappuccino. The youth from earlier was clearly relieved when Balot called him over and served her with a wink and threw in a free cookie.

As she was working Balot's hands sometimes stopped, and at these times a strange song would run through her head.

Dish, wash, crash, mash.

A nursery rhyme that she'd once heard. The taste of the cappuccino in her mouth changed to the distinctive acrid taste of the explosion.

Hash, gash, josh, bash.

Once the hellish work was over—work that was like dredging through a swamp with your face—Balot sat still, unflinching, staring at the monitor. The long-decayed contents of a broken shell. No tears came. Her head was strangely cool. Even as it spewed forth its poison, her heart continued to beat steadily.

"I didn't think we'd be able to prepare such a detailed document in such a short time."

–I couldn't bear any more.

"You've done well. All we need to do now is send this off to the Broilerhouse."

–Send it off?

Balot was terrified. As if it had only just occurred to her that this was what they were going to have to do.

–We're going to show this to people? This? The truth about my past?

"We are."

The documents were suddenly collated now, turned into data ready to mail. Oeufcoque's actions.

Balot's whole body stiffened. She couldn't take her eyes off the monitor. Just as you can't take your eyes away from a sharp knife flashing in front of your eyes.

But the data wasn't being sent. Oeufcoque was silently waiting for Balot. Balot hadn't yet said either *yes* or *no*.

"Balot?"

–Just wait a minute. Please. Try and understand me.

Her stomach clenched. She wished there was something that could squeeze her tighter. Without it she would blow away like a fine powder, she thought.

"Balot. How about looking at it like this," Oeufcoque said cautiously. "This is just like excavating fossils. A number of skeletons are going to emerge, one by one. But as you know, they're all long since dead. However fierce they used to be, now they are sleeping soundly as fossils."

–Do you really want to hurt me so badly?

Balot lowered her eyes and gritted her teeth. Oeufcoque continued on, politely as ever. "You're living in the present, not back in the primeval era of the dinosaurs. The things that used to live are real only insofar as they *used* to exist. But right here, right now, you are the one who's really alive."

–Can you wait? Just a little longer.

"Of course, you could even delete these documents if you wanted. If that was the best way for you to deal with your fossils."

She realized that Oeufcoque meant it. Even though there would be serious repercussions.

But Oeufcoque cared more about Balot's feelings, right to the end.

If I said no, this person wouldn't make me do it. She could believe this fact.

The very fact that she could believe it took a great weight off her shoulders. The conviction that you would never be betrayed—if only there was more of this, the world would no longer need its drugs or guns.

Balot took a slow breath. She straightened her back and looked at the monitor as if to accept that she was now about to die. Balot's surroundings started to disappear from her consciousness. Soon everything was gone, and all that remained was herself and the rotten egg of her past—her *josh*—that floated on the monitor before her eyes. As a result she didn't even notice the presence of the waiter who passed beside her.

For some time now the youth had been wandering back and forth from her table. Like a bellhop angling for a tip. Balot *snarced* the monitor right in front of his eyes without lifting a finger.

Just then she realized the waiter was looking at her and raised her head, taken aback.

The waiter was marveling at Balot. Not so much because he'd been peeking at her private documents, but simply at Balot's abilities. And then he quickly thought that she must be using some newfangled electronic device, and moved away, having convinced himself.

Balot averted her eyes. Like she was coldly pushing him away. She checked the monitor. She saw the symbol that confirmed the documents had been safely transmitted.

She let go of Oeufcoque quietly and took her lipstick from her bag.

She gave it a twist and used the poppy-red stick to graffiti the monitor.

SWITCH, WITCH, BITCH

She wasn't particularly thinking about her actions. She just knew that she wouldn't be satisfied unless she did.

I AM THE WITCH

she added, then put the lipstick away.

Oeufcoque popped his head out of the adaptor and watched Balot writing the graffiti.

Oeufcoque said nothing but returned to being a mouse and looked up at Balot.

Balot turned away from him and sipped at her half-finished cappuccino.

Her lips felt the milk that was stuck to the rim of the cup. She licked it off with her tongue. Deliberately. Thoroughly, lasciviously. Then, unable to stand being under Oeufcoque's gaze for any longer, she put the cup down.

Casually she extended a hand toward the monitor and focused her consciousness in her fingertips. She felt electricity crackling through her fingertips. The lipstick on the monitor peeled and fell off.

Oeufcoque seemed a little surprised. Balot was extremely adaptable when it came to using her abilities, had figured out all sorts of handy tricks. It took her less than five seconds to neatly clean all the graffiti.

Balot took a pinch of the flecks of lipstick that had piled up around the edge of the monitor. She

rubbed it together with the dirt that it had picked up and brought the mixture up to Oeufcoque's eyes

–This is what I am.

She manipulated the screen, bringing the letters up.

"It's a pretty shade of red. In the right context and as long it's matched with the right things," Oeufcoque expounded, seriously. "It's undoubtedly an appropriate color for you at the moment. That's what you mean, right?"

He gave an extremely raspy chuckle for a mouse.

Balot sighed. A long, drawn-out sigh. Enough to make her tight clothes loosen a little.

–We're like kids arguing.

She brought this up on the monitor, then cut the power. She wiped clean the red stain on her fingers with a napkin, and then made Oeufcoque turn into a choker before putting him on.

Inside the crystal pendant a golden mouse was wearing garish red lipstick and winking.

–When did you first start watching me? Balot *snarced* and asked Oeufcoque as they walked through the mall.

"Since before you started living in Shell-Septinos's apartment."

–Then all the time I was with Shell?

"On the whole, yes. We weren't particularly focused on you at that time, though."

–So how far did you guys investigate me?

"We don't know anything more than what was in the documents we sent off today."

–Well, everything's there, but there's nothing really about me.

"How do you mean?"

–Do you think I'm crazy too?

"Crazy? Why?"

–Well, letting people touch my body for money, for example. A child who'd do that sort of thing.

"All I know is, the way our society is set up, *that sort of thing* is pretty much part of the system. And that it's men, with their notions, who prop the system up. If you *are* crazy, then there's an awful lot else that's crazy along with you."

Balot looked around the mall, now bathed in twilight. People were gradually starting to hunch their backs in response to the cold wind that was now blowing. The transparent rays of sun were casting long shadows across the hard glass surfaces, and no one walking along the ruby-colored Sunny Side seemed particularly crazy.

–Can I tell you a little about myself?

"Talk to me."

–When the Hunters—the cops—closed down the house where I used to work, one of them asked me a question. "Why prostitution?" he asked.

I answered, "Because I wasn't a virgin."

When I did, the Hunter whistled. **Whew,** ***just like that. Like I'd done something incredible.***

"Is something funny?" I asked.

"You girls these days, you got it all worked out," the Hunter answered. And then he asked, "When did you give it up—your virginity—to the lucky guy?"

The lucky guy—I didn't know that this was how you were supposed to look at it.

And then I answered.

"To my father, sir. When I was twelve."

I thought that the Hunter would whistle again, but he didn't say anything.

When he first met me the Hunter said that he had daughters. Two of them. The elder already at high school. The younger the same age as you, he said. As if to say, **Don't worry, you can talk to me.** ***So I tried asking him this question.***

"Have you ever wanted to touch your daughters, sir? Have you thought about sleeping with them?"

I was just wondering if everyone was like that. But the Hunter said, "You're crazy. What a ridiculous idea. Such a thing!"

I didn't understand why it was* such a thing, *and it hurt me when he said I was crazy. And the Hunter's expression—as if he were staring at a crazy woman. I couldn't understand anything. Only that the Hunter wasn't a friend of mine, like everyone else.

Soon after that I met Shell. He came to meet me, saying he was a fan of mine. He'd once come to me as a client. He promised me everything. Said he'd reinvent me completely. I asked if that meant he loved me. He said, "That's exactly right." Then I got in his car.

And then:

–Oeufcoque, are you going to tell the Doctor all this?

"No, I'll lock everything you've just told me away inside myself. Only you can decode it."

–And what do you think? Do you think I'm crazy?

"Hmm… I wouldn't know. After all, I'm just a mouse with his intelligence amplified to human levels for the sake of research. I'm not even a mouse anymore, just something that looks like a mouse. There are people who say that my very existence is crazy."

–You? Why?

"Who knows. From their perspective I suppose I *am* crazy. I've been trying to pin down exactly *what* I am ever since being born, but in the end I still have no idea. As I'm originally based on a male mouse, I've studied the human male psyche, trying to act like one, but I don't even know if that's right."

–What exactly are you? Why were you born?

"There were these people who commissioned some researchers to come up with the ultimate tool," said Oeufcoque. "The commission came from the army. A few prototypes were manufactured, and I'm one of those. But the research project itself was halted, and I was about to be *disposed of* as something that had never existed in the first place."

–You were almost thrown away? Why?

"It became *politically expedient* in the postwar era. Was it people that were evil or their tools? This was the political hot potato that emerged not long after the peace treaty between the Commonwealth and the Continent was signed."

–Were people evil or their tools?

"Let's say there's a gun crime. Is it the person who used the gun who is at fault? Or is the gun evil for existing in the first place? Well, postwar politics repudiated the gun and exonerated the person. The very fact that weapons of war existed at all was considered the root of the evil. As a result the regulation of weapons—and all technology related to them—became the subject of intense debate. In order to protect people."

–So you were abandoned too?

"That's right. I was born for political, military reasons, and for the same reasons I was about to be eliminated. Had the *Scramble 09* bill not gone through I would have been *disposed of* for sure. My existence depends on continually proving my *usefulness* to society."

–Is that why you're helping me?

Oeufcoque seemed about to answer, but then suddenly went silent.

–What's the matter?

"A strange smell. Plural. A strong sense of duty, systematic movement. Hostility."

Balot was about to reflexively stop in her tracks when Oeufcoque gave a sharp order.

"Carry on walking. Don't stop."

Balot did as he said. Unconsciously she started picking up the pace.

"Cut through the department store. We'll be able to determine if there are people following you." Oeufcoque gave precise directions, which Balot obeyed as she sensed the presence of the people around her, feeling them in all three dimensions. It was as if the skin covering her whole body were splintering under the tension. Before long she noticed six people emerge from the hustle and bustle following her every move.

"It's because of the Internet café we were just in. We must have been picked up by the enemy as we accessed information on Shell. They traced us and sent people right after us."

–What do we do?

"See them off, then return home." His tone of voice was so composed she could have believed he was talking about buying an umbrella because it was raining.

–How?

Balot was already scared. She had premonitions of something terrible and wanted to burst out crying.

"Take me in your hand."

As Balot loosened the choker and gripped it, it turned with a squelch into a black leather glove that fit her right hand—well—like a glove.

The Oeufcoque-glove informed her in a plain voice,"I want you to calm down. I was developed as an All-Purpose Tool to be the strongest hand-to-hand combat weapon in the world."

Balot left the mall and went down a side alley where there were fewer people. The six men drew near, blocking all her escape routes so precisely that you could almost have described them as conscientious.

Balot used her perception abilities to sense that they were speaking with each other via wireless devices.

"Three groups of two, is it? Looks like they're planning for two of them to capture you first. They smell as if they're going to start out on a definite course of action. The other four are planning to use a car or something to take you away once you've been captured."

Balot sensed the group of four congregate in one place and get into a car, just as Oeufcoque had said. The two men that were coming toward her now split up, one coming from the direction Balot was walking in and the other creeping up from behind.

–They're getting closer and closer.

"When they come, all you need to do is stick out the hand that you're holding me with."

The gloomy alley was deserted. She wanted to stand still there. But a strange momentum carried Balot's legs onward. She balled up her hand covered by the glove—Oeufcoque—and soon she approached the corner around which the man lay in wait for her.

Balot stopped still at the same moment that the man leapt out.

Flustered, Balot thrust out her right fist, and the next moment a silver rod extended with incredible force. The tip of the rod scored a direct hit on the man's throat, and he let out a moan —*gack*.

In front of the dumbfounded Balot the man collapsed in a twitching heap.

He was convulsing, his eyes peeled white, and he had started frothing at the mouth.

"I added a dollop of extra electricity for good measure. He won't be waking up for a good

while."

Balot noticed she was now wielding a police baton in her right hand—a *turned* Oeufcoque.

The other man was now coming at her from behind.

He saw his colleague on the ground and started running toward her.

In a daze Balot stuck her right arm out, but her assailant easily dodged the baton.

Or rather, it looked as if he had dodged it—but *it* didn't let him dodge. Her right hand—Oeufcoque—moved of its own accord, and skillfully thrust the tip of the baton square under the man's jaw.

The man fell to his knees. This time, though, the shock was lighter. The man remained conscious and moved his head toward her.

At that moment the outstretched baton squelched and *turned* into a pistol.

The man stared into the muzzle in abject terror. Balot, too, cowered in astonishment.

Bang—a dry sound—and a shot went off in the man's face. But it wasn't a bullet. Rather, a mesh of fine wires. These wrapped around the man's head and released their electric charge.

He never stood a chance. Without making a sound the man lost consciousness and toppled over in a faint.

"Well, then. Let's get back to the parking lot as soon as we can."

Oeufcoque was now just a glove again; the gun had disappeared with a squelch.

Balot stared at the two men on the ground, dumbfounded.

Balot ran back to the parking lot in a hurry, but the moment she jumped into her eCar, Oeufcoque spoke. "They're quick. The rest of our pursuers have already noticed something wrong and are moving." Oeufcoque, still a glove, sounded as unconcerned as ever.

–What shall we do? Do we have to finish them off?

"It'd be best if we could avoid the need for another fight. Let's leave as quickly as we can. There's a possibility they may have reinforced the mall exits, but if there's nothing then let's just go home."

–Do you really think there's nothing more going to happen? Balot asked folornly as she made the eCar do an emergency start.

"Well, I hope that nothing more is going to happen—that'd be good." Oeufcoque's words were somewhat deflating.

–I never know whether I can rely on you or not! Balot told him, a little angry.

"That's a problem. You're supposed to be a witness to my *usefulness* in this case, after all," Oeufcoque said, genuinely concerned now, and as he did so the car moved toward the mall exit. Then a large van emerged at their flank, and Oeufcoque immediately ordered, "Enemies! *Snarc* the car and let's escape!"

–See, I told you something would happen.

Balot, who really was angry now, *snarced* the car as a reflex action. The car sped on—at a speed much higher than its official limit—and, barely sticking to the road, squeezed in front of the van.

Balot looked back and saw it following immediately behind them. Listening to the clamor of car horns sounding all around in protest, she asked,

–What do we do now?

"Let's shake them off, using your abilities. I'll give the directions."

Oeufcoque turned into a Nav, and she asked him,

–So I should make the car go full speed ahead?

"Yes, with your seat belt fastened and watching out for pedestrians."

–And I can truly rely on you?

"Absolutely."

Balot pursed her lips and fastened her seat belt. Still looking at the display on the Nav in her hand, she concentrated on the inner workings of the car and *snarced* its circuits for all she was worth.

In an instant she grasped the layout of all the cars in her surroundings, the positions of all the pedestrians, and the obstacles—and, like a professional skateboarder, made the car jump through every little gap and opening, pushing swiftly onward.

–I've never driven a car before, Balot informed Oeufcoque (a little late in the day), but Oeufcoque just responded calmly, "There's a first time for everything."

As they pulled out of the East Side and entered the trunk road, two pairs of headlights emerged from behind and roared toward them, accelerating harshly. Their escape route had been read like a book. Without looking at the vans that were growing steadily nearer, Balot measured them, *grasped* them.

The window on the passenger side rolled down, and the barrel of a gun emerged from the gap.

"They're going to start shooting at us, so dodge. Should be no problem with your abilities."

It was strange—because Oeufcoque told her that this was true, she began to believe it herself.

Balot even knew the movements of the people inside the car. Even going nearly a hundred kilometers an hour, she could clearly grasp the movements of the person in the van putting their finger to the trigger.

Balot manipulated the whole car, *snarcing* every mechanism simultaneously.

The gunshot masked the sound of the car's harsh breaking. Even as the bullet grazed the hood, the car swung around in a huge arc, moving in the opposite direction.

She grasped that the vans on either side had sped past and were now frantically trying to stop.

The car did a half turn, all four tires smoking, and sped off back the way it had come.

The cars that had been behind Balot were now in front of her, drivers frantically yanking their steering wheels. Balot grasped all their movements, dodged all the vehicles without a scratch, weaved through the oncoming traffic, and dashed on for a few hundred meters. She noticed that one of the vans behind her had stopped, crashed into one of the oncoming cars.

The car's 180-degree turn and sprint were both Oeufcoque's idea. Balot followed whatever path Oeufcoque indicated and found herself back in the bustling East Side.

–Oeufcoque, are you a pacifist? An extremist? Which is it?

"A pacifist, of course."

–Would a pacifist make someone speed down a road the wrong way?

"It was the least risky means of dealing with the state of emergency that we were just in. It's not as if I'm allowed to *turn* into a rocket launcher and blow the enemy away."

–Could you really* turn *into something like that?

"It's against the laws of the Commonwealth. If I *turned* into such a thing they'd *dispose of* me the very next day."

–Even if it's an emergency?

"It might be an emergency, but the ends don't always justify the means."

Unimpressed, Balot followed Oeufcoque's directions, weaving freely through the complicated back streets of the city in order to try and shake off the other van. Soon they entered an underground tunnel, passed through a number of intersections, and when they re-emerged above ground near the central district of Mardock City the van was nowhere to be seen—all Balot could see was the night sky of early spring that flowed all around them like fresh black ink.

"Looks like we've managed to lose them completely. The first lot, at least," Oeufcoque muttered thoughtfully, still giving directions as a Nav.

–Are you saying there are more?

Balot curled up anxiously, still gripping the Nav.

"Here and there I smelled something unusual. A sense of purpose completely without emotion—as if it were merely observing us."

Suddenly Balot's senses noticed that a car was drawing near. It cruised along at the same speed as them about a block behind.

–There's a car stuck to our tail—an enemy?

"No…this smell…"

At that moment the car that was tailing them abruptly moved into the same lane.

It maintained its distance a few cars behind, precisely.

–Oeufcoque?

"It's him—I'm sure of it," Oeufcoque whispered in a subdued, serious voice that she had never heard from him before.

Before they realized it the car behind had gradually closed in.

At length Balot turned around and saw the driver with her own eyes and gasped.

It was the driver from that night—that night she was burned to death in the car, when Shell got into another AirCar, driven by his bodyguard.

"It's Dimsdale-Boiled. OctoberCorp's *Scramble 09*," Oeufcoque muttered quietly. As he did so the car behind flashed its headlights.

–What? He's asking us to stop?

Balot's eyes widened. At that moment, the comm device in her car started blinking.

"As a fellow Trustee with responsibility for solving this case, I demand my statutory rights to Information Disclosure." The voice was distinctive and hailed them from the car behind. Balot was startled. Oeufcoque was silent. The voice coming through the comm device continued, "We've already made our background checks on that rental car. If you refuse to participate in the Information Disclosure then the public rental car agency will testify as to your *cooperative* attitude."

–What's he talking about? Why can we hear his voice? What is this person saying?

"In order to come to a peaceful resolution wherever possible, Trustees in charge of cases will often negotiate with each other, exchanging certain prescribed pieces of information," Oeufcoque explained. "Refusal to do so counts as a big minus in court."

–What are we going to do?

"Let's stop the car up here. We'll just have to have a little chat," Oeufcoque said, turning back into a glove that covered Balot's right hand. At length Balot timidly pulled the car over onto the

hard shoulder.

05

Boiled pulled up two car lengths behind Balot's car.

Balot got out of the car, and Boiled emerged at the same time and stood in the shadow of the door.

They waited in silence as another car went past.

The giant man, his face inhuman, stared down at Balot, expressionless, and Balot was overcome by a fear that made her legs tremble. It wasn't so much just a fear of being killed. Rather, it was a fear of being killed *without being able to put up any sort of resistance at all*. Indeed, that very fear sapped her will to resist, draining all her strength from her body.

"Don't worry, Balot. As long as I'm here he won't do anything lightly," Oeufcoque said, as if he had read her innermost thoughts.

At that point Boiled's eyes moved for the first time. He looked straight at Balot's right hand.

"So that's where you're hiding, Oeufcoque," Boiled said, his voice floating across the air. An oppressive, expressionless tone of voice that made Balot feel like she was looking down the barrel of a gun.

"When did you submit your application to become the Trustee for the opposition?" Oeufcoque asked.

With cold light glinting in his blue eyes, Boiled replied, "This afternoon. That's your employer, is it?"

Boiled jerked his chin slightly toward the girl, unimpressed.

"She's the Concerned Party in this case. What's the disclosure you're requesting, Boiled?"

"I want you to revoke the Life Preservation Program," said Boiled.

"That's intimidation. Not a request. As ever, you really think that's the best way to solve the case?"

"I'm not here to solve the case. Just suppress it. I want you to tell me what charges you are bringing against Shell-Septinos."

"The district attorney's office will publish that information in due course. Wait for the official announcement," replied Oeufcoque, calm.

"I want to know in advance what the procedures will be in the event that the Concerned Party dies or absconds."

"We'd still proceed with the prosecution, if that's what you mean," declared Oeufcoque, and the cold glint in Boiled's eyes seemed brighter than ever.

"Are you frightened?" Boiled's eyes suddenly moved toward Balot as he spoke.

Balot's legs started shaking more violently than before. She did her utmost to keep her composure and return Boiled's gaze.

"If you don't want to die you should withdraw your petition and abrogate your rights as Concerned Party in this case," Boiled said. Words that struck at the heart of Balot's frail courage.

"Don't listen to him, Balot. The moment you abrogate your rights is the moment no one will be able to protect you anymore."

In her breathlessly tense state Balot barely managed to nod; she gripped Oeufcoque tightly in her right hand. Choking back the tears of terror and humiliation:

–I don't want to die.

The feelings were welling up inside her, and she threw the whole lot at Oeufcoque.

She felt the glove enveloping her right hand getting warmer. Then Boiled's voice filled the air. "I want to know the date of the provisional hearing and whether the Concerned Party will be appearing in person."

"In three days. As for the rest, wait for the official announcement. And don't even think about a repeat of today's tactics. We'll take you to the cleaners in court," said Oeufcoque.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Boiled's face twisted slightly. An inhuman smirk. "I'm looking forward to holding you in my grip again, Oeufcoque."

Boiled climbed into his car. He closed the door and without further ado slid right by Balot's car and drove off.

Balot watched the car move away.

–You know that person?

"We used to work together, in the past. Now we're enemies." Balot didn't ask anything else—all her strength had suddenly drained from her—and she climbed into the car.

She closed the door and sat there, unable to do anything other than hug her knees close to her body.

She didn't want to say anything. Just stay huddled in her shell.

"Trust me, will you? Just like I trust you," Oeufcoque said. "By protecting you, I prove my *usefulness*."

–Why me? she asked keenly. Oeufcoque didn't have an immediate reply.

Tears started welling up in Balot's eyes, pouring out on her lap as she held herself tightly.

Balot stayed there trembling, crying out of fear and regret.

The car drove on slowly. Not through Balot's *snarc*, but on autopilot.

Cheerful music played on the radio. She was all cried out, and stared out at the night lights of the city with puffy eyes, eyes fixed on her transparent reflection in the window.

There were still plenty of rules that she had to endure. But the helpless fear was scraping away inside her, shaving off pieces of her will to resist and her feelings of hope.

Oeufcoque, still a glove, seemed like he was thinking about something, but suddenly said, "You're not crazy."

Balot turned her half-shut eyes toward the glove on her right hand.

"The way you think and the way you feel—both are completely normal," Oeufcoque continued. "That's the reason that I want to serve you and to settle this case."

–This case?

"There's absolutely no reason why you deserved to die. Yet you were locked in a car and had third-degree burns inflicted on your whole body. We're going to determine the motives and the aims of the killers and expose them to the world."

–My case?

"That's right. As the Concerned Party in this case you chose *Scramble 09*, acquired your technology, and obtained the thing right in front of you: me."

Balot tried to think about this but wasn't very successful. She couldn't think what she could do. If there was anything that she could contribute, surely it was her newfound abilities?

She was starting to lose sight of what she was trying to do.

The roads were congested. The Nav wouldn't let Balot maneuver like she just had in the car chase. Listening to the radio as she watched couples and parents with children drift by in similar rental cars, eventually she *snarced* the car.

–Will you explain to me why I need to appear at the trial?

"Well, to be precise, nothing's coming to trial as such, not just yet. What we're doing right now is trying to establish that Shell is indeed the right suspect. Your appearance should be able to formally establish that we're accusing the correct suspect—Shell—and at the same time will give us approval to progress the case further."

–In what way?

"We want legal proof of the fact that, behind the scenes of your attempted murder, much bigger and more systematic wrongdoings are taking place. We'll get a big reward from the Broilerhouse by solving this case."

–And if I'm not around you won't be able to do that?

"Exactly. If the concerned person in the case disappears then there's nothing more that can be done. The Broilerhouse and the Hunters will just wrap things up as they see fit."

–That's why you're protecting me? Or making me protect myself? And what do I get from this bargain?

"Let's see. Your life, your dignity, closure, and money to live. Does that seem about right?"

–Oeufcoque?

"Yeah?"

–Do you mind if I take a little drive?

"Of course not. Do as you like. Let's just get home before it gets too late."

Balot's car headed from the East Side toward South Street. The air outside, glowing with the lights of the city, seemed to Balot like brittle glass that would break at the slightest touch.

Balot switched the car heater on and attached the sleeves to her top. As if she were binding herself up.

"If you wrap yourself up too tight you might break the equilibrium in your cortex as it tries to repair itself. It'll also put strain on your internal organs."

–But I feel safer this way.

So saying, she stared at the glove. Her eyes were more focused than before, and she perceived Oeufcoque's existence more keenly than ever.

–So you don't think I'm crazy?

"No, I don't think you're crazy."

–Hey, Oeufcoque?

"Yeah?"

–Have you ever seen a video? One with kids like me in it, I mean?

"A few times. In experiments to determine my sex drive. I didn't really get what all the fuss was about."

–Do you know what S&M is? And fetishes, that sort of thing?

"A little, not in detail—what about them?"

–One of the favorites at the house where I worked—she was called Queen Bee. She told me that I wasn't suited for S&M. Clients who liked that sort of thing wanted their girls to be

kicking and screaming, whereas my selling point was playing dead. I really liked that girl. Even though she was the cause of the last place I worked going bankrupt, no one had a bad word to say about her.

"Hmm."

–Once I saw a Show where she appeared as the star. Alongside a number of M girls—masochists who received the punishment she dished out. She trussed them up, spanked them, whipped them, that sort of thing. Everyone in the Show was very pretty. One of the M girls liked needles, so she had these needles stuck crosswise through her nipples while she was tied up. "These are disposable syringes," Queen Bee said. No one else had used them previously, so there was no chance of catching any diseases. Also, normal needles actually have quite serrated edges, so they'd be unnecessarily painful. That's why disposable needles were best.

"I see. And then?" Oeufcoque spoke in a serious tone that encouraged Balot to continue with her monologue.

–After the needles were removed she was tied up tighter, with blood pouring from her nipples. She was such a pale-skinned girl that she looked incredibly beautiful just then, as if her nipples were weeping blood. I think the reason that it seemed so beautiful was that Queen Bee acted the way she did. The M girl said so too. As the M girl was bound tighter she said it was like being held by someone who loved her. No one else could make her feel that way, only Queen Bee. Queen Bee made the ropes feel like the arms of her mother and father. She didn't like being tied up roughly by men, though, she told me after the Show. She said they didn't understand.

"And that's why you wear your clothes so tight?"

–Maybe. I remembered what the girl said back then at the Show. "It's like being embraced." Oh, by the way, she died in the end, that girl—some time after Queen Bee was arrested. The M girl was on drugs, getting paid to be tied up by this guy. He was high and strangled her to death. There was a trial then, too, even though they ended up deciding that the man hadn't done anything wrong.

"And were you there at that trial?"

–Yup. The manager of the brothel—the woman who gave me my name—brought the prosecution, but in the end she lost her case. As a result the Broilerhouse put a mark on us, and the Hunters came and arrested all the clients on our books, that's what she told me. Those people—and that shop—weren't really that bad. There were plenty of places that were much worse. In particular the video work—there was a guy who could film it really well—and everyone was clean and gentle. I heard of plenty of places that were terrible, but no one the manager introduced us to was that bad. I was even told that if I could remember how to smile I could become a legitimate actress, a real star. Well, that production company went bankrupt, but still…and have you seen any of the videos that I was in?

"No."

–Would you like to?

"I'm not sure… I don't really know. But let's go back a little—you said arrested? Why was Queen Bee arrested?"

–Flashbacks.

Balot stopped to think for a moment. About how she could best explain the gravity of this word.

–We're talking about a girl who earned a thousand, two thousand a night. Very beautiful —in face and body. She could do anything and would let anyone do anything to her. She never sold herself short, but on those rare occasions when she did have to go cheap she did so cheerfully, without fuss. Even though most people are very worried, both before and after the deed. Do you understand? Yet this girl ended up killing one of her customers. With a concealed gun. Premeditated. After tying him up she shot him over thirty times, apparently. In a soundproof room, the sort you often get in **specialist** ***hotels. She kept on firing rounds into him long after he was dead.***

"Why?"

–Flashbacks. That's what she told them when she was in the holding cells, anyway. She didn't say anything at the trial. I watched Queen Bee's trial. With the rest of the girls. And after that we watched the trial of the M girl case I was talking about earlier. Neither trial went on for long. Nothing to them. Just men working for pride and money. Really pathetic. A lousy Show. That's what all the girls were saying. I thought so too. No one found out why Queen Bee flipped out. The men just kept arguing with each other. Queen Bee was grinning and laughing all through her trial. Flashbacks. The men tried desperately to ask if something had happened when she was younger, but Queen Bee wouldn't tell them anything. At the end the manager gave Queen Bee a kiss and said, "I'm really sorry." Queen Bee replied, "That's okay, love you." And, "Goodbye."

"First degree murder…so it was a life sentence for premeditated homicide, I suppose? The women were lovers, were they?"

–Queen Bee and the manager weren't an item, if that's what you mean. Not a lesbian couple. They loved each other like family. I sometimes yearn to see the girls from back then myself. As if they were family. In the end, everyone drifted out of town and ended up here in Mardock City. 'Cause this is the city where you can earn the most. But also the cruelest city. I don't know what's happened to the girls who escaped from the institute with me, but I'd like to see them again too.

"And you'll be able to. You can see them as much as you want once this case is resolved."

–But I bet if I did go and see them I'd only get jealous—or be envied myself. We'll end up competing to see who is the most beloved. So it might be better that I don't go and see them after all.

"Most beloved?"

–By a partner, a man, in a same-sex relationship, anything. Even by God or by fate. **Whether we are loved, or not.** ***The worst thing of all is to die without. But in the end, I think most of us will end up dying precisely because we aren't loved.***

Eventually the car pulled off the road that was taking them toward South Street and veered toward the city center. Toward the place—the vast space—where the multitude of different streets and townscapes came together.

Oeufcoque seemed to be thinking hard about Balot's words.

–Hey, Oeufcoque.

"Uh-huh?"

–Do you think they'll ask me about my father at the trial? About* my *flashbacks?

"Hard to tell. If the counsel for the defense comes across your background and decides that it's to their advantage to destabilize you emotionally by asking you questions about him, then, yes, they probably will."

–Will the case fail if they prove that I'm crazy?

"Well, uh, yes…"

–What will the official titles be? Of the crimes we're accusing them of, I mean?

"Violation of the protection of minors law for starters, then forgery of official documents, status manipulation, rape, and attempted murder."

–Will they ask me about how I felt while I was doing it? The things that I did, the things I let him do to me? Will they ask me what clothes I was wearing? They'll say that the man did nothing wrong, because of how I allowed them to keep me, or because I wanted it. That's what they always say at trial.

"I have no intention of letting them get away with that sort of thing at *this* trial."

–The manager said something similar. That it was all nonsense. But no one listened to her. And no one will listen to me either. When there are plenty of girls like that…

"It won't be like that this time."

–I do want to help you two, you know. I really do. Do you believe me?

"I do," said Oeufcoque.

–I want an explanation. An explanation that allows me to think that even if I'm hurt, I'm not damaged. A means to an end. I want to feel that I'm going through all this for something, someone. Inside me there's a part of myself that would be happy to see me dead. But I don't want to die. Not like this.

"Balot, you're…"

–I have nightmares whenever I sleep. Always. And particularly since the incident with Shell. Do you have dreams, Oeufcoque?

"Not often, no. But I *can* tell when you're having nightmares. It's your smell, whenever you're asleep—"

***–I don't want to die while I'm feeling this way. This much I know. But I'm scared. So scared I can barely move. Really. I could excavate fossils, or become a poet or a scholar—but none of that would explain anything. I don't believe that having ambitions or dreams for the future can explain anything. All I know is that I want what I want* right at this moment. *Because I've never ever wanted something* and then got it.**

"Balot…you've really done well to get to where you are now. Tremendously."

–What do you mean?

"You've survived. Even when you were under incredible stress, you've defended yourself by disciplining yourself to *obey* in order to survive, to protect your life. You've fought an immense battle, and that's required great courage and endurance. Well, from now on I'm going to join you in your battle. I'll turn into any weapon you want me to. You might not be used to this way of fighting. And, in truth, I can't say which way of fighting is better. Nevertheless, I want you to understand our way of doing battle. We mean to discover everything—to determine why you were almost

killed—and to do this we're using the plan we devised while you were in your coma, which we'll modify as we go along based on your reactions now that you're awake."

–And that's enough of an explanation for you? That by listening to my grumbling, and getting lots of money at the end of it all, you can somehow make your life worth living?

"Like you, I have strong feelings of wanting to discover *what I am*, to be able to say 'I've got it!' At the moment, all I'm doing is projecting a constructed image of myself onto this city. I may be the scourge of the shadowy underbelly of this place, but when it comes down to it I'm nothing more than a shadow myself."

After a short while the car entered Central Park.

They passed the boathouse near the pleasure quarter and arrived at the patch of blackened grass now surrounded by police tape used to cordon off the crime scene.

It was the place where she had died—the spot where she was nearly burned to death, trapped inside her own shell.

Balot parked the car there. After the tiniest of pauses she jumped out of the car, resolute.

The cold night air was drawing in, and the spot was quiet, with not a Hunter to be seen.

She crossed the police cordon and stood on the still charred ground. She looked up to the skies and succumbed to the overwhelming desire to shout with all her heart—but all that emerged was a breath that sounded like a draft leaking through a crack in the wall.

–There's nothing that I really want to do. Everyone—all the girls I know, anyway—don't get to do what they want, they just live without, until their lives are messed up by drugs or men. All I want is an explanation as to why we should *want to live, even when we're subjected to all that.*

Balot closed her eyes, took her time, readied herself, and *snarced* straight at Oeufcoque.

–Love me.

"Erm… What's that, now?"

–Give me an explanation, an excuse to live. I want to do that for you. It'd stand up in court as proof of your **usefulness,** ***and anyway, you're supposed to do whatever I ask. So, love me.***

"You mean…like a family? The way Queen Bee and the manager loved each other?"

–Shell told me he loved me. That's why I got in that man's car. I want to be loved by someone like you.

"Wait a second. Would that give you closure? Satisfy you?"

–What am I to you?

And with that, it happened. Oeufcoque turned back into a mouse with a squelch.

Balot had *snarced* him—forcefully, completely. Oeufcoque's eyes opened wide, and he took a step back in Balot's hand. He was trembling.

"M-my primary defenses…you can penetrate them? In an instant, just like that…"

–Won't you answer me?

"Uh…um…wait a moment—so—well, you're my client, and you're the official Concerned Party in this case, so it's my responsibility to protect you. And if there's anything unsatisfactory about my conduct then you're free to file a complaint at the Broilerhouse at any time."

–Whatever. I don't care about that sort of thing. That's not what I'm asking you.

"Look, hang on a minute. As you can see quite clearly, I'm a one-of-a-kind all-singing all-

dancing mouse. Nothing more. I think there's some sort of misunderstanding. Do you think that all it takes is a wish from you and I can *turn* into a full-fledged human—a grown man—for your convenience? Impossible, I'm afraid. I don't have the ability to become another living creature."

–I know. You're a mouse. A cute, kind, talking mouse. Do you think I'm crazy too? Like the Hunter I told you about?

Oeufcoque breathed a deep, exhausted sigh. So deep his suspenders seemed to slacken. "Look, do you think of me as some sort of *pet*? The sort that you can buy in a shop, complete with a cage and a wheel?"

Balot's face fell. She looked sadder than ever before. It was almost as if this was the first time Oeufcoque had properly seen Balot's facial expression.

–That's not what I meant. Just that…

"As far as you're concerned, whatever *I* may be, I'm here to protect *you*, to become your weapon in order to keep *you* out of harm's way. Whereas you—you need to keep yourself alive and win the right to survive, to live."

–"A new buddy."

"What…"

–You said those words to me right on this spot. When I was all burnt up. You said that I'd be your new partner. As you looked into my eyes.

Again Oeufcoque's red eyes grew wide.

"You can remember that? In the state you were in? You were aware of your surroundings?"

–Drugs don't really have much of an effect on me. Something to do with my genetic makeup. Uppers or downers. They just make me feel a bit woozy and put me to sleep. That's how I avoided turning into a drug addict like my mother.

"Even so, we're talking out of the ordinary here. You had third-degree burns over pretty much your entire body. And yet you maintained consciousness. To the extent that you can remember precisely what other beings were saying."

Balot bit down on her lips with a disconsolate expression. She was trying to cope with a loneliness that was so bitterly cold that it felt like her heart might freeze over. Oeufcoque noticed this and plonked himself down on the palm of Balot's hand.

"As a living tool, people who use me ask me to do all sorts of things. As a result I've come into all sorts of conflicts with my former partners. Confrontations big enough to end our partnerships decisively. If, even so, you really want to give up your status as my client and become my partner…"

–I accept. I'll listen to whatever you have to say. And I'll appear in court.

"Hmm. Well, I have a feeling we'll carry on having our differences of opinions, but… Well, why not. I'll have to get you to learn a few things here and there, but it looks like you're okay with that too."

Balot stared intently at Oeufcoque. As if to say she didn't mind how much it hurt her. Oeufcoque stuck his paw out as if he were conceding total defeat and said, "Well, then, let's go with that for now. All the best, partner."

Balot gave him a fingertip to return his handshake, then *snarced* him.

–Balot. I want you to call me by my name.

"Uh, sure, but what about your real name…"

–It's like the manager who gave me my name said. That's the most appropriate name for me. And I think it is too. In the same way that you're called Oeufcoque 'cause you're so soft.

"Is that so? Okay. I get it. Well, all the best, then, Balot. I'm Oeufcoque. My personality might be soft-boiled, but I'm not so half-baked that I don't have a PI's license from the Broilerhouse, so I'm fully qualified to supervise a case as Trustee. *Scramble 09* cases being my specialty. Mind you, they do consider me to be human, of course."

–And so do I.

Before he had a chance to resist Balot gave Oeufcoque a kiss on his little head.

And for the third time, Oeufcoque's red eyes, usually so sophisticated and mature, grew as wide as saucers.

Balot got Oeufcoque to turn into a choker again, faced the scorched earth that spread out from her feet, and waved goodbye. Ever so softly.

06

The monitor on the Doctor's desk displayed a number of emergency signals when the pair returned to their hideaway. Each one a summons from the public prosecutor.

The Doctor himself was in the lab at the rear. He was grappling with a microscope, both arms deep inside what appeared to be some sort of fish tank.

"Hey, Doc, looks like the DA's trying to overload the circuits," Oeufcoque said jokingly. The Doctor just shrugged without turning around.

"Doesn't concern me," said the Doctor. "I've done all I can for them over there. Now we've just got to get on with things the best we can, make ourselves useful."

Balot stood there, isolated from the other two who seemed happy to exchange banter without even looking at each other.

Suddenly she felt mischievous. She playfully bumped the Doctor's back with the box she was carrying.

"Watch it!" the Doctor complained, breaking away from the fish tank and turning toward Balot. "That's quite a big box—what's in it?"

"A fancy new suit for you, Doc. Balot wants you to wear it at the trial. A condition of her appearing," explained Oeufcoque as he disentangled himself from Balot's neck and stood—now a mouse—on her shoulder.

"And you picked it out, did you, Miss Rune-Balot?" asked the Doctor.

Balot nodded. It was the last thing she'd bought on their shopping trip.

"Well, er, I do already own my own clothes for formal occasions, you know…" continued the Doctor.

"Unfortunately, Doctor, your sense of style isn't particularly to our client's taste." Oeufcoque pointed at the Doctor's hair. The mottled, dyed mess. Then Oeufcoque mimed bunching up his own hair, as if to say, *Do something about your hair, will you?*

"Well, fine, all you had to do was say so earlier, you know," said the Doctor. "And what's my own sense of style got to do with anything? The public prosecutor is doing everything he can to try to force us to make things easy for them, accept a summary hearing instead of a proper trial…"

Balot looked offended. She pushed the box toward the Doctor.

"You just don't get it, do you, Doc? Our client is sensitive and whimsical. You've got to respond to her feelings properly, or else before long we'll find a request has been filed for new Trustees for this case," Oeufcoque said in a grave tone of voice, leaning over Balot's shoulder.

"Well, *someone's* been doing their research," the Doctor said, his lips curled.

Then he looked at the sizes written on the box and nodded. "A perfect fit."

An easy enough feat for Balot, with her newfound abilities. But Balot just pointed at the monitor, disgruntled.

The Doctor didn't seem too bothered about it. Rather his attention kept drifting back to the contents of the fish tank.

"Don't worry about that. You've changed your mind about attending the trial, so that changes everything at their end too," the Doctor said, holding the box under his arm nonchalantly while touching the fish tank with his other hand.

"There are still a few tests I need to run on these babies. When you stop and think about it, it's quite a task, after all. Trying to completely regenerate something that was still in middevelopment in the first place. It's not like you'd want to make do with a cheap substitute or anything."

Balot frowned. She had no idea what the Doctor was going on about.

"What exactly are you up to, Doc?" asked Oeufcoque, sensing Balot's confusion.

"What do you mean, 'what'? I'm looking at ways of getting Balot's voice working again, of course!"

Now Balot's mouth gaped open. She remembered the Doctor's words from earlier.

Now we've just got to get on with things the best we can, make ourselves useful. That was definitely what the Doctor had said. And she hadn't taken the words in properly, not at first. But now, all of a sudden, a wave of emotion rose up inside her, as if escaping through a hidden crack. *I've met them at last*—that was how she felt about the odd pair, man and mouse. She realized that her heart had never dared let her feel this way before, ever, so afraid she was of being betrayed.

"Oh. And, thank you, Balot. For the suit. I accept it gratefully. I'll have to keep quiet about it in my report to the Broilerhouse, though, as it might be interpreted as a bribe from the Concerned Party. But I like this sort of gesture now and then. Reminds me of back when I was a *civilian*…" The Doctor trailed off.

Balot bowed with a flourish. She wanted to thank Oeufcoque and the Doctor. But no voice came out of her throat, so, instead, she grabbed the Doctor's box away from him and planted a kiss on it.

Oeufcoque was thrown from her shoulder by the sudden movement. He landed skillfully on the desk.

The Doctor was now holding the box, which had been thrust back into his arms by Balot. She did a quick turnabout and ran out of the room, with the Doctor still staring at her. The door slammed shut with a bang.

The Doctor stared at the door before turning to look at Oeufcoque. "What was that about?" he asked the mouse.

"I don't know. It looked like she was overjoyed for a moment, but then she was gripped by contradicting emotions—shame and fear. Oh dear. She may be starting to have her doubts as to our *usefulness*."

"Are you sure about that? Look at this," the Doctor said, hoisting the box around toward Oeufcoque to flaunt the poppy-red kiss mark.

"That's a human trait, isn't it, Doctor? We can interpret that as a sign of gratitude?"

"Exactly, Oeufcoque. Do you know what? I think she quite likes us."

The next moment Oeufcoque and the Doctor were up, jumping for joy like a pair of children.

Balot returned to her assigned quarters and locked the door securely.

Both the electric lock and the chain. Then she took out the day's purchases and lined them up on her desk.

She picked up the Eject Poster and stuck it on the wall.

Resting on the bed, holding her knees to her body, she *snarced* the projector on and chose some pictures of fossils.

She stared into the air, watching pictures of hundreds of different spiral shells appear and

disappear. She tried to fade out of consciousness, project herself into the blank space, just like she always used to.

She couldn't do it. And she couldn't stop crying.

It was as if all the day's events had crept up on her and exploded all at once. As if they'd piled up bit by bit into a mountain before collapsing in a landslide.

She'd run away from the misery of not being able to speak when she wanted to, but before long she started wondering whether this had really been necessary, whether it wasn't an over-reaction. The thought of this made her tears fall even harder.

She stayed in that position for a long time, but eventually she rose back up, her breathing now sounding like a cold winter wind. She took the lipstick out of her jacket pocket and wrote in big letters on the wall where the endless shells were appearing and disappearing with dizzying speed:

THEY ARE RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.

Then, right below that:

YOU HAVE NOBODY, NOWHERE.

And then again:

THEY ARE RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.

Crying without being able to make a sound was tougher than she'd imagined. Almost all the air in her body seemed to want to escape through the void that was her mouth. Her insides were as hard as steel.

Balot endured. Just as she had endured everything up to now. Pushing her whole body to its limits.

But unlike the previous occasions, she didn't need to kill herself this time. This much she was sure of.

The fossils swirled across her body and the wall like a whirlpool, floating up, then disappearing.

Why me? The question was now about to get yet another answer.

"There's one problem, though," said Oeufcoque. "What's the definition of *love*?"

The Doctor pulled away from the water tank and turned toward Oeufcoque with a surprised expression. "Should I interpret this as a sign of a new ego developing, Oeufcoque?"

"No, just a request for information, pure and simple. I think I'm going to have to be able to answer this question with, er, a degree of flexibility."

"Well, it's a difficult enough question to answer in any case, particularly when you're trying to lump all different kinds of love together. There's familial love, neighborly love, *agape*—that's godly love—all sorts," explained the Doctor.

"Seems complicated. But I'm just asking about the need to be loved," said Oeufcoque.

"What, you want me to make a female version of you? But you're unique, a miracle prototype. Even if the army were to resume their program, I'm not sure if we could make a female…"

"Not me, her! I'm talking about Balot!"

"Ah, I see." The Doctor nodded. But then he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and asked, doubtfully, "By you? You're saying that she's looking for something from *you*?"

"She's looking for *foundation*, for some sort of emotional stability… I'm guessing that's the best way of explaining it. According to my intuition—my *nose*—she's got all these qualities, these

needs. Because she's never been in a decent environment. To survive in the world that she's been living in, she's needed some sort of *foundation*, or stability. And she calls this *love*."

"Oh, I know all too well how sharp your *nose* is," interjected the Doctor. "Within the team responsible for you, most of the researchers feared you from the bottom of their souls. They were afraid that you'd show up all their inadequacies. You'd analyze people as if they were nothing more than the sum of their chemical parts."

"You're talking about a long time ago, Doc. That was then and this is now. I know a lot more now than I used to."

"I'm sure. So, what exactly is it that you're trying to say, Oeufcoque?"

"I want to protect the girl. But I'm not sure what more I should be doing."

"Well, I know what you *should* be doing. But I don't know what the *right* thing is," said the Doctor.

"It's as if she's trying to treat me like a human."

"I didn't realize that this *wasn't* what you wanted, Oeufcoque. I treat you like a human, and so did your former partners. It's just what happens naturally."

"It's different, though. Something's different from what happened before. Something's changing inside me. She's made the decision to appear in the courtroom, and that's fine. But it makes me feel terrible, as if I'd done something inexcusable."

"Hmm." The Doctor looked Oeufcoque up and down as if he were inspecting some rare specimen.

"I think I should try to be drier, more detached," continued Oeufcoque.

"Uh-huh," the Doctor mumbled, and then continued, sympathetically, "but that's not really who you are, is it?"

He spoke with a serious expression. Oeufcoque rolled over on the desk onto his side and sighed deeply. His little body seemed to wilt, and he looked smaller than ever.

Chapter 3

CRANK-UP

01

The *Stairway to Heaven* shone, dazzling, beautiful in the morning sun. The spiral stairway—the unofficial symbol of Mardock City—wound round in three circles before stopping cleanly in midair, an unfinished monument that was designed to be *just so*.

Symbols of Jupiter—the planet of the king of gods—were carved into its outer edge, and every part of the handrail and supporting pillar was ornamented with scenes from the myths.

The monument that migrants had built long ago to express their hope and their faith.

Mardock—the Stairway to Heaven—was now seen by the steady influx of people into the city as a symbol of their own dreams and ambitions. This epitomized life in the city: to climb to the top, to *arrive*, was the ultimate virtue.

Under the stairway that soared up over the municipal offices of the Broilerhouse, Balot waited, Oeufcoque wrapped round her neck as a choker and the newly besuited Doctor beside her.

–Every time I look at this staircase I can almost see the phantoms of people falling from the top.

Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque, and he replied, "It's the system that people devised long ago, sorting the world into winners and losers. But it doesn't necessarily have to be that way—there's more to mankind than that. We're just talking about part of a system. Try not to let it get to you."

–If I fell from the top, I'd die, wouldn't I?

"I'd turn into whatever tool I needed in order to prevent that." Oeufcoque's voice may have been small, but it was wonderfully reassuring to Balot.

Balot readied herself, then entered the Broilerhouse with the Doctor.

The court hearing started at nine thirty precisely and later broke for a thirty-minute lunch recess.

After everyone was seated they waited another two minutes for the judge to return from the restroom.

Twenty minutes later Balot decided on absolute silence, and before long the time was 15:32 and the judge lowered his gavel, signifying the end of the proceedings.

The six hours of deliberations produced results that were entirely satisfactory as far as the Doctor, Oeufcoque, and the district attorney were concerned. For Balot though, it was all one long humiliation.

"The fact that you can't speak may well turn out to work in our favor. Consider the impression it makes," said the DA just before the discussions started.

"It might only be a grand jury, but there's no better way of demonstrating the suffering you've been through," said the senior assistant district attorney, a man in his early thirties—the DA assigned to their case. He was welcoming the Doctor and Balot who had joined the throng of court personnel congregating on the eleventh floor of the Broilerhouse on Central Street and was treating them like royalty. He wasn't the only one—DAs who were supposed to be busy with other cases were finding reasons to drop by the waiting room to catch a glimpse of Balot.

Hey, is that the survivor that everyone's talking about? She seems in pretty good shape to me, what's she going to accuse them of?—they could hear these sorts of snippets of conversation

from the other side of the door.

"Some of the veteran DAs like to make fun of this sort of case," said their DA apologetically. "They still don't think prostitution or rape is anything to get worked up about."

Their DA seemed different, though. He said so himself, and the Doctor introduced him as a different sort of man. A man who was sympathetic toward innocent victims, women who were the victims of violence, and those of a low social standing.

"The counsel for the defense will probably follow the same line of thinking. Are you sure you're ready for that? Just try and compose yourself as much as you can. Remember, the counsel for the defense doesn't really care whether their client is guilty or not."

The DA smiled brightly as he gave Balot her instructions. As if that was part of the plan to ensure that Balot would be nice and relaxed.

"Remember, the truth means nothing to these people. No matter what sort of criminal their client is, they'll use every sort of legal trick up their sleeve to try and get them off the hook, and in return they're rewarded in the region of sixty thousand dollars a year, a pretty damn good salary these days…" The DA shrugged his shoulders at this point, as if to say he was troubled by it, but what could you do?

"And it's our job to face these people, specifying which of the material witnesses should be treated as suspects," he continued with a shake of his head. "The counsel for the defense we're up against in this case is quite a formidable opponent, I have to admit. Even as we're bringing the lawsuit against them, there's no sign of the defendant, Shell-Septinos—he's not in jail, and he's not even been named a formal suspect. He hasn't even denied the charges—just called to have the deposition denied. Well, to make up for it we left everything right till the last minute ourselves, as well, I suppose, not letting them see the charges before we absolutely had to."

The DA giggled, as if he'd told a particularly witty joke.

"I bet there was some discussion among the other side's camp when it came to tactics—they would have been wondering right till the last minute what we were going to hit them with."

Balot just sat there, still.

In the waiting room. And later, at the DA's table in the courtroom. She sat still, making no noise or sound of movement, just enduring words such as *She seems fine to me* or *Well, it stands to reason, I'm not surprised*.

"So I'm sure the defense will be unnecessarily—well, they'll say all sorts of things about you and won't pull any punches. If he could get a not-guilty verdict for his client by appealing to the court's latent misogyny, he'd do it, make no mistake. At any rate, all you need to do is stay calm—even more so this time given your injuries—and all you need to do is to press the *yes, no,* or *no answer* button."

At this point Balot nodded for the first time. That was all it took for most men to take the lead, tell her what to do. The DA was no exception.

"Well then, let's go," said the DA, heading toward the courtroom with the petitioner and Concerned Party, Balot, and the Doctor, who was the Trustee in charge of the case.

In the elevator the DA spoke to the Doctor. "I have to say, you're looking good, Mr. Easter! I wish you were always dressed like this—you'd put my mind at rest no end."

The Doctor's hair had been dyed back to its original black and was combed down and slick.

His suit looked good on him—it made him look gentlemanly, like a man of distinction. The Doctor gave a shrug and a little smile. The DA relaxed a little and then whispered in the Doctor's

ear.

"But for next time let's rethink the girl's outfit. We're trying to show that she was a poor girl from the West Side preyed on by one of the East Side rich, and she's a little too—*elegant*—for that."

Balot could hear that too. Not the precise words, but a general sense of what they were talking about, by sensing the atmosphere. Unconsciously she folded her arms and wished for something to wrap around her tights. Her dress was dark, of course, just as the DA had specified, with the skirt hem coming down past her knees. She dealt with his request as she did with any of her clients who were fixated on her clothes.

Oeufcoque, still a choker, said nothing.

His existence was a secret to all other people, of course, but even if it hadn't been, Balot wouldn't have wanted him to say anything at this moment. There was still an egg-shaped crystal hanging from the choker, but this time there was a simple geometric pattern at its core, not a picture of a golden mouse.

09:25 hours. Balot sat at the plaintiff 's desk.

On the defense side was the counsel, the accused man himself, and the Trustee for the defense.

Balot was very conscious of her own abilities. She didn't have to look that way, but she knew where everyone was and what they were doing. The defendant was calm, composed. There was a very faint sign of fear, but it wouldn't be this man doing the fighting in any case. And he wasn't the one who was going to be hurt. That was the counsel and the Trustee's job. And Balot's job. The accused didn't even look at Balot.

A number of reporters from the press—with their tags dangling from their necks—had firmly ensconced themselves in the front row of the spectators' gallery, and all eyes were on Balot. They were here with a very different set of aims from Balot and the Doctor.

They were here, inevitably, to write up events as scandalously as they could.

They wanted to write about Balot as a modern-day Lolita. Someone who was all too aware of her sex appeal though still a girl, a girl who had seduced an important man from the amusements company, bringing him to ruin; that was how they were looking to make the story play out.

How had she become the lover of this important man? And how was the girl connected to the Trustee of her case? The girl must have known what she was doing, must have been well aware of her abilities.

This senior executive, Shell, was a foolish man too. Not only had he been deceived by this girl, he was now being forced to spend hours and hours in this place, time he should have been spending on important business.

Deceived. By a little girl. By anyone. Never mind what actually happened, the details were trivial—if the defense could twist the facts to this conclusion then they'd have it made, the perfect story. The best sort of copy.

The trial began, and the district attorney started off by stating in detail the injuries done to Balot. He explained how premeditated and how deliberate Shell was in inflicting these injuries. And what his aims were in doing so—what was he hiding?

At each stage the counsel for the defense interrupted with objections such as "Irrelevant!" and "Conjecture!" He rebutted the DA's arguments, claiming that the whole story was a fabrication by the plaintiff, designed to steal Shell's assets by improper means.

The defense counsel then pressed his case further, explaining in minute, piercing detail the

track record of Balot's dissolute and slovenly lifestyle, diligently arguing that Shell merely wanted to rescue Balot from her struggles. After all, Balot wasn't forced to live with Shell in the first place—she'd gone there voluntarily, or would it be more accurate still to say that she'd forced herself upon him?

As he did this the DA resisted in turn with strong objections of his own: "Counsel is deliberately trying to shift the focus" or "Counsel is appealing to the emotions, not the facts!"

Now and then Balot was called on to testify, and at such times she pressed the buttons marked *yes* or *no*, or occasionally the *no answer* button. Whenever a more detailed answer was required of her she wrote her answer on a designated sheet of paper and handed it to the clerk.

The courtroom was not set up to be particularly sympathetic to those who couldn't speak. Instead, everything was rather awkward, stilted. As if to say, *What do you mean, someone who can't speak is appearing at the trial?* An uncomfortable atmosphere pervaded the courtroom.

And it was toward such a person—Balot—that the counsel for the defense would use phrases such as "You reap what you sow" or "The defendant can't be held responsible for the plaintiff 's choices." At the same time the DA emphasized the enormity of the suffering that Balot had been subjected to.

The grand jury craned their necks from left to right following each of these exchanges, as if they were following the volleys in a tennis match. Good? Evil? Like a rally. As if they were playing a game, climbing a flight of stairs, muttering *guilty, not guilty, guilty, not guilty* alternately with every step, and whichever foot they ended up on at the top of the steps would be the decider.

"So, at the beginning, why didn't you resist?" asked the defense counsel. "If Shell really manipulated details of your status, or forcefully raped you, or trapped you in a car, there must have been some point at which you actually *tried* to resist him?"

While the DA was objecting, Balot thought back to her time in the institute.

Back to the time when she was told, year in and year out, by the social workers what a *bad girl* she was.

Some of the volunteer workers weren't like that, of course. But some *were*, and they were the ones who had more clout when it came to the everyday management of the children's lives.

And so it was that when, for example, a male volunteer would rape a child on a lower bunk bed, the child on the upper bunk could only tremble in dread and pretend to be asleep. They had fear drummed into them as a way of life, each child deep in their personal hell.

Once, a girl from the institute dropped a kitchen knife on her foot when she was on kitchen duty. Balot watched as the girl's foot was skewered through her slipper. Balot remembered seeing the tip of the knife protruding from the sole of the girl's foot. And, of course, the girl had dropped the knife—thrown it at her own foot, actually—on purpose, knowing that if she hadn't then something even worse would have been lying in wait for her that night.

The girl was taken to the institute's medical wing, but she had to return two days later. Hobbling on crutches. Three of the workers gang raped her on the night she came back.

"Why didn't you resist?" the defense counsel asked Balot, bringing her back to reality. If Shell was deliberately trying to hurt Balot then surely there would have been some sign of resistance, no?

The DA objected. Speaking rapidly, in a loud voice.

Why hadn't she resisted? Everyone tried to escape. Some of the children did manage to adapt

to life in the institute the best they could. Those who'd worked themselves into positions of influence, of authority. But for the vast majority of the children, all they could think about was escape.

And after surviving under conditions that felt like you had a knife to your throat every minute of every day, after having every aspect of your life regulated by those in charge—food, drink, shelter, leisure time, friendships—at the end of it all they asked you why you didn't resist. The same adults that never gave you the slightest chance to do so in the first place.

Balot's reply to that question was *no answer*.

Eventually they arrived at the recess for lunch, and the DA conferred with the Doctor regarding the points where they were losing ground.

Balot and Oeufcoque ate lunch while the others talked in elaborate detail about possible strategies to ensure the case progressed from the provisional jury to indictment. She could barely eat anything, and he hardly spoke.

–I want you to understand that I'm doing this for your sake, Balot explained to Oeufcoque.

After a short pause Oeufcoque responded. "These are just procedural formalities. They're not for my sake or for your sake. The real battle comes later." He seemed somewhat apologetic on one level, but at the same time was deliberately keeping these feelings in check. In order to prevent himself from accidentally letting slip any words of apology, such as *I'm sorry* or *This is inexcusable of me*.

Balot gripped the crystal on her choker and squeezed hard.

"At this point I will need to disclose some shocking facts," said the counsel for the defense. Brightly. As if he were relishing his duty—as, indeed, he was.

"This girl had sexual relations with her father. Starting from when she was even younger than she is now. Isn't that right, Miss Rune-Balot?"

The courtroom rustled. A hesitant, low rumble.

The DA jumped up. "Objection! Irrelevant, a meaningless question." But the court's interest had been piqued. The jury was curious, and who was a mere senior assistant district attorney to stand in the way of a jury's curiosity? He gritted his teeth and took a seat.

Balot stared right back at the counsel. Coldly. Coldly enough to freeze the poison solid in her heart. Slowly, calmly, she pressed the button.

–Yes.

The courtroom erupted. The judge banged his gavel. The counsel pressed further questions. Pointless, stupid questions.

"Was it your father who initiated this?"

–Yes.

"Did you resist him?"

–No.

The courtroom held its breath, not even daring to swallow.

"Why didn't you resist?"

Balot scribbled an answer on the paper she was given and handed it to the clerk.

The clerk then passed the paper to the judge, who read it aloud: "Because I loved my father."

The courtroom erupted in noise, like a kettle overflowing. The judge banged his gavel wildly,

repeatedly.

"You mean, as a man?" continued the defense counsel.

–No.

"Then you loved him as a father?"

–Yes.

"You had sexual intercourse with him more than once?"

–Yes.

"Many times?"

–No.

"Can you remember precisely? The number of times?"

Balot raised her hand and lifted three fingers.

"Three times?"

–Yes.

"Your older brother attacked your father violently when he learned of your relationship, yes?"

–Yes.

"Do you know why your brother felt so angry at your father?"

–Yes.

"Why?"

Balot was given more paper. She scribbled on it again, passed it to the clerk again, and again the judge read it out: "Because he loved me."

Further excitement in the courtroom. A number of the reporters rose from their seats, running to pass on the news.

"Did he look at you as a woman?"

–No.

"Then as a younger sister?"

–Yes.

"Now, as a result of his injuries, your father was admitted to a hospital in the capital as a severely disabled patient, yes?"

–Yes.

"Did you ever see your father again after that?"

–Yes.

"How did that make you feel?"

Balot, head bowed, didn't answer. The DA leaped up and shouted, "Objection, an irrelevant question." The judge banged his gavel. The counsel continued down a different line of questioning.

"Do you still love your father? As a father?"

–No answer.

"Why can't you answer?"

Balot remained silent.

"Do you love your father as a man?"

Balot shook her head emphatically. The DA objected, screaming. As if to intercede, Balot raised her hand to call the clerk over for some paper. On it she wrote: "I don't know how I should feel about my family anymore."

"Not just your father?"

–No answer.

"Your brother is still in the penitentiary, isn't he?"

–No answer.

"After that, your mother entered an ADSOM facility—that is to say a rehabilitation center for alcohol and drug addicts—and still lives there to this day? Is that right?"

–No answer.

"Did your mother know about your relations with your father?"

–No answer.

"Do you believe that what's happened to your family is your fault?"

It was a reflex action. Balot didn't press the button. But she did *snarc* it.

–Yes.

No one saw that Balot had actually not pressed the button, but then, no one was about to pay any attention to that now. Apart from the Doctor. The defense counsel then asked her a succession of additional questions. Balot just stared at the one button, fixated, *snarced* it, and made sure her will was unwavering.

Balot's answers to all the additional questions were the same: *No answer.*

02

Balot's father was a mild man. He had a beard but didn't make a frightening impression. He had a healthy physique and was a sound blue-collar worker. He was somewhat rustic—burly—but had a gentle grip. Even when his motor neuron disease started taking a turn for the worse and he was down to three fingers on his right hand, he still gave off an aura of gentleness. On his left hand he only had his thumb. His four working fingers undid Balot's uniform when she returned from school one day.

That was when she learned to project her consciousness into space. As Balot's father's fingers and tongue tentatively caressed her body, she felt an unknown feeling well up inside her. Desperately trying to suppress this feeling, she launched it into the air. There were the unbearable feelings of guilt, and then there was her clear, calm consciousness. With half-shut eyes she looked at the room, looked at the furniture, and tried to project her consciousness onto something else.

But she hadn't yet perfected her technique of losing herself.

Sometimes her voice leaked out. Naturally. Like in the movies, when a woman was embraced by her lover. She fought it. Biting down on her lips, frantically averting her eyes. Trying not to look at her father's face.

How long had she been doing this? Then, all of a sudden, a feeling to extinguish any lukewarm waves of pleasure. A red-hot scalding sense of bitterness. It was penetrating her. She heard her father's voice, apologizing. She heard her own voice asking him to stop, please. But the pain intensified, and her father started moving his body.

She tried forcing her father back with both arms. Her father was crying. He gripped her arms tightly with his hand with three fingers. His tears dripped down onto her arms and breasts. As if he were vomiting up blood. Eventually, the waves of pain subsided into silence, and a lukewarm liquid—different from tears—trickled down her thighs.

This was the "lucky guy" that the Hunter spoke of. This was why she had no answer when the defense counsel asked her why she didn't resist.

She could recall her father's face from then—full of sorrow—anytime. She could barely remember him looking any other way.

She'd wanted to do something about this sadness. Balot didn't really understand that her father had just made love to his own twelve-year-old daughter as he would a woman, and in any case she wasn't really in a position to refuse.

After the last time they had relations, Balot was taking a shower, mind blank, when she heard shouting and screaming. And then—a burst of gunfire.

Balot wrapped a bath towel around her body and came out of the shower to look on the scene. Her older brother, screaming like a mad dog. At his feet was her father, writhing in agony from a gunshot wound.

When her brother saw his little sister, steam rising from her half-naked body, he cried out maniacally.

Her brother was a volunteer at ADSOM. The reason he worked there could be traced back to childhood, when his mother shouted at him for not properly holding the end of the tube she was using to bind her arm as she was shooting up.

Balot's brother was as neurotic as their mother. He was trying to save her from herself, but despite his good intentions, his irritation and hatred grew violently. And her brother was pretty much the only one in the family who could do a proper day's work to earn a living wage.

So her brother was always on the lookout for opportunities to earn money more *efficiently*.

Before long he got mixed up in bad company and became a gunrunner. This all came out in the investigation into his father's shooting, and her brother was consigned to the penitentiary.

"It was all for nothing," her brother said to her at their last meeting.

Balot wasn't able to say a word and just watched her brother's back as he was led away. Then she herself was put into the institute, which was just as bad as prison. For a long time she thought of the institute as her punishment. That she was the one who broke her family up, so she was the one who deserved to be punished. Words that were said to her at the institute—*bad girl, you're a bad girl*—still resounded in her ears.

The counsel for the defense unceasingly pressed his line of argument: the explosion was a complete accident and Shell had absolutely no murderous intentions. Indeed, Shell had been trying to rescue her, but she wouldn't trust him and started violently clawing at the door handle—and that had made the whole situation worse. He pointed to several scratch marks on the inside of the AirCar door as proof. As if the whole thing was Balot's fault.

The defense counsel spared no effort in his exertions trying to persuade the jury of this.

Balot seduced her father without hesitation, wrecked her own family, plunged wildly into the uninhibited lifestyle of the dropout, and did whatever took her fancy—a Teen Harlot such as we've never seen.

So the counsel continued. Should we really abandon Shell-Septinos to his unfortunate circumstances, this man who had gone through trouble upon trouble to reach his position, working hard, motivated by his healthy ambition? Rather, shouldn't we be *supporting* such a man, who showed such kindness toward a girl such as Balot?

Right now, Shell-Septinos is worried—frightened that he might have committed murder. Because he can't remember the details of the day in question, due to his memory disorder. Of course, the girl knows all about his condition, and she's trying to take advantage of it.

This was how the defense counsel argued.

The DA hit back with all he had. He summoned to the witness stand the Hunters who were investigating the case and the Doctor as an independent PI. He explained exactly how the girl had become an innocent victim, a sacrifice to one man's vaulting ambition.

After it had all finished, the DA said to Balot's team, "That counsel overplayed his hand, I think. However you look at it, our girl here was calm and composed, and she was obviously hurt. That's all going to make an excellent impression on the jury. Not a single one of these jurors is a university graduate. That's in our favor too. Because Shell has manipulated his own status records, passing himself off as a member of the elite, a university graduate. I have to admit I was a little worried at first, though—our girl is beautiful and elegantly done up, after all. There are some jurors who refuse to believe that a defendant can be guilty unless they see a victim at death's door, shredded to pieces."

Ultimately, though, there was one word that emerged from the proceedings that interested Balot above anything else: *ambition*.

A regular man, motivated by his healthy ambition.

No: he was a pathetic man, who had found a way of climbing up society's greasy pole—or

stairway—and was prepared to discard everything else in order to achieve this, just so he could lord it over other men and women, as if he were some sort of a hero.

Balot could see this clearly now. *I've been a fool*, she thought, and at the very same moment she felt a burden—the cursed voice that told her that she was a *bad girl*—lift cleanly from her shoulders.

That was the one ray of sunshine that she'd gleaned from the whole experience—the silver lining to the gray clouds of humiliation.

If she quit now there was nothing left. This was now a matter of life or death.

She understood this clearly. That was why she could stay so calm.

Why me?—she imagined yet another answer to this question.

Beyond that answer lay Balot's personal stairway, the one that she was destined to climb.

Balot left the courtroom with the Doctor.

The DA was in an excellent mood. He said that the next time they returned to the court it would *definitely* be in the form of an official trial—he was so enthusiastic that it wouldn't have been surprising if he'd broken out into a cheerleading routine for Balot. The DA bid farewell to the pair for the time being, and Balot and the Doctor were just at the Broilerhouse entrance and about to leave when they noticed a man silently approaching them. A man so solidly built that even the shadow that he cast seemed enough to swallow them up.

"Boiled…" Taken aback, the Doctor spoke his name out loud without meaning to. The man who had sat at the table on the defendant's side. The man who had threatened Balot. The Trustee supervising the case on Shell's side—Dimsdale-Boiled.

For the first time Balot was within spitting distance of the man and faced him directly.

He seemed even more humorless, even more lacking in emotion, than ever. Violent, dusky eyes stared out from under his wide brow, gaze fixed on Balot. Or at the choker that Balot was wearing.

"The full details of the lawsuit will be made available to the defense from now on. It'll mean that I get to start my operations in earnest." Boiled, heartless as ever, clearly directed his words toward his former partner Oeufcoque. The former partner he had fallen out with spectacularly over some obscure incident.

Balot stared right back at him, head-on.

"I'll find it. Withdraw your case." Boiled was undoubtedly talking about their hideaway. His voice was light and indifferent, but it carried the impact of a thunderbolt.

Balot's knees quivered. Acid rose in her stomach.

The man looked at Balot. As if he had noticed her existence for the first time.

"When you have the time, be sure to ask Oeufcoque about my MO for solving cases," Boiled said, then turned his back. His footfalls made almost no sound at all as he glided away. In the distance they saw Shell-Septinos appear, and the two men climbed into a car.

Balot stood glaring at them from the entrance of the building. She watched where they were going. And the building, and all the people around her.

The fear inside her was being pushed aside by a feeling she had never experienced before: *fury*.

It was the first time this had ever happened. When she came to, she noticed that her knees were

no longer shaking.

She breathed out quietly. It was like blue fire pouring from her lips.

It was live or die. And now her whole body was making its choice.

Still glaring at the world, she put her fingers on the crystal hanging down from her choker.

–Show me your way of doing battle.

03

"That was a weird scene we just witnessed. And I'm experiencing weird emotions too," Shell muttered. His Chameleon Sunglasses gave off a dull glint the color of zinc. "I don't have a single recollection of ever being nervous or frightened. All that vanishes whenever I have my *Clapping*, my memory preservation operation. But…it's weird."

At this point he looked at Boiled. "I'm frightened," Shell said, shivering. He wore a forced smile.

Boiled gave no answer. He just nodded ever so slightly and drove on in silence.

"I can understand that I'm experiencing fear. I can even understand why this situation is making me afraid. What I don't get is, why *her*?" Shell stretched his neck forward as if he were looking for an answer from the sky beyond the window. "We're talking about a girl that I, in my current state, have never met—never even heard of her. A puny, powerless little girl. *And yet I'm afraid of this*. Just thinking about the fact that the girl is still alive makes me choke on my breath."

He loosened his tie as if he were indeed having trouble breathing and took a flask from his pocket.

"Business is business. Sacrifices need to be made—things, people. And the most important sacrifices have the honor of shining on as precious jewels on my fingers. Nevertheless, this time I'm surprised. I'm afraid from the bottom of my heart. Because that girl isn't on my finger yet. Why is that? *Why*?" he moaned as he opened the flask with trembling hands, taking a violent gulp of its contents.

"What on earth was it that made me want to kill that girl?" He was speaking to himself now, between gasps. Behind his sunglasses his eyes were bloodshot. Alongside the scotch he downed a large handful of the Heroic Pills that he'd bought cheaply at insider rates.

He stared pointedly at Boiled with his eyes that were now bright red and inflamed. "Tell me now, when exactly did you say this girl was going to disappear forever from the face of this earth?"

"Soon enough…" Boiled spoke quietly, and this was all he would say. He controlled the steering wheel without the slightest hint of wavering and directed the AirCar toward the foot of the high-class Senorita district in the east.

Shell's lips suddenly twisted into a crooked smile, and he laughed an unsteady laugh. "That man who was at the trial today—he seemed very flaky for a former partner of yours."

"That was the maintenance staff."

"What?"

"In other words, that one's a tricky enough customer all right, but he's not the one we really need to worry about."

"He's not this Oeufcoque you keep talking about, then?" Shell's lips were again distorted. He was frantically trying to conquer his gnawing fear, turn it into hatred and murderous intent.

"No, Oeufcoque never shows himself in public. He's always teamed up with someone else." Boiled spoke in a low voice, cold and machinelike.

"But you've got his number, right? You know his MO, his special skills," Shell insisted, staring unblinkingly at Boiled from behind his lead-colored sunglasses.

"And the same goes for him. He knows me well—my MO, and my special skills."

"In short…" Shell started. Silence reigned, then eventually he found the words to continue. "He's going to be a tough nut to crack."

Boiled nodded.

"But who are you saying he's partnered *with*? That lanky guy we saw today? What's he hoping to achieve by standing behind someone like that?"

"Perhaps it's not that man," said Boiled.

"Then who?"

"That's what we're going to find out. That's why I need to hire some people. Starting tonight—from a place that you don't know about."

"Well, feel free to use the hidden stash of money as you need. Do as you please. Just be thorough and show no mercy," said Shell.

"As you say."

"I'm…terrified. Even though I've never once been frightened gambling at a Show, even with hundreds of thousands of dollars at stake. No job is supposed to faze me. And yet…" Shell's teeth had suddenly begun chattering, and his limbs were shaking.

The truth was that Shell was wavering. From a place so deep within himself that even he didn't know what was happening right at that moment. Accordingly he was panicking about all sorts of things.

"Flashbacks!" Shell spat the word out under his breath. Then he shook his head stubbornly. "That's absurd. There's no way I could be having such things. How can my past be coming back to haunt *me*..."

He trailed off into a faint moan—this man who was always wiping his mind's slate clean—and then he leaned over toward the driver's seat.

"So, what are we talking about? What *sort* of people are you planning on using, for example?" Shell asked like a rabid dog, drooling and baring his teeth.

"The sort of person who works not just for the money but also for the satisfaction they get out of their target." Boiled's voice was low and calm. "I'm talking about the type who enjoy treating people like objects, slicing them to pieces and using their remains as ornaments."

The meaning of these words gradually dawned on Shell.

Behind his sunglasses his eyes narrowed before gradually widening.

"That's…fine," he said with a smile. A gruesome smile that twisted across his face. "That's excellent. And while you're doing that, I'll continue with my business. My deal, a huge deal, a deal for *my* benefit. That's what I'm going to use to run farther up the stairway. The stairway to heaven—*Mardock*. I'll run far enough, high enough, higher, higher still, that my past will never be able to reach me. Far enough that my past will vanish forever."

Shell continued his feverish mutterings as if he were speaking in a nightmare.

Boiled dropped Shell off at his luxury apartment and sped off in another direction.

He headed toward the riverbank, stopping at a car park in a mall along the way.

There he switched cars. From the AirCar to a normal gasoline-powered car. A car that he had left there beforehand.

Before setting off again he opened the trunk of the new car. There were two attaché cases

within.

He checked their contents, first one, then the other. Then he got into the car and headed straight for the harbor.

The evening sun was painting the sea a bright scarlet as he reached the gates that marked the checkpoint to the harbor.

Boiled handed over his ID card at the gatehouse.

The security guard, a young man, stuck the card into his machine to confirm that Boiled's jurisdiction was active and asked with a whistle, "An incident at the harbor, eh?"

Boiled took the card as it was returned to him, shaking his head. "Not a big one."

The young security guard was clearly thrilled as he opened the gate. "Call me if it looks like anything's about to go down. I train every day at the shooting range, you know."

"Guns won't be needed." Boiled cut him down instantly, but this only impressed the young security guard even more.

"Just as I thought—a true PI." He nodded in agreement.

The car entered the harbor, where heavy machinery was lined up all around. He drove past a giant mechanical crane that looked like a mutant crab, which was unloading a multicolored convoy. He passed the part of the convoy that had been stripped of its load before turning around and returning, skeletal now, via the overland route from which it had come.

Boiled parked his car in the car park where the trailers were lined up, took the attaché cases from the trunk, and carried one in either hand as he walked toward the boats. He soon spotted the crane that he was looking for.

BANDERSNATCH: ANIMAL HUSBANDRY EXPORT AND IMPORT

The billboard was written in large letters above the crane house. Boiled looked up at the person in the cockpit. He slowly approached the workplace videophone and pressed the call button.

–Whassup?

A crude-sounding voice answered. Then an image. A man in fatigues.

He had a broad face partially hidden under a mass of dread-locks. His skin was brown like a scorpion.

"Where's the company?"

–You gotta say which company you talkin' about.

The man maneuvered his body uncomfortably in the tight cockpit so that his ear was on the earpiece.

"I'm bringing payment. For the company that's said to be involved in animal husbandry import and export," Boiled informed him, and in return received a shrill laugh from the video phone.

–What's your name?

"Dimsdale-Boiled."

–Heard aboutcha from the boss. That's us. Import and export of livestock. Wait a sec, I'll just get everythin' sorted. Come on to the weir. Yeah, come inside the white line.

Boiled did as he was told. Before long a giant shipping container was lowered down from the sky. A rectangular box big enough to fit a whole house. It was an impressive sight to behold as it hit the ground with a thump.

The electronic lock on the door lifted, and the door slid open sideways. Boiled entered the container, and as he stepped in, the door closed behind his back automatically.

It was dark inside, but not for long. Pale fluorescent lights illuminated a number of workspaces divided by partitions as well as filing cabinets and sofas. There were even monitors on the desks. It was like being in an office somewhere.

An unexpectedly high-pitched giggle emerged from behind one of the partitions.

"Are you surprised at the contents of our trailer? Welcome to our offices."

Judging by voice alone, it was a young girl who spoke. But when the speaker emerged from behind the partition he was clearly a man, probably in his late thirties. He had evidently had an operation of some sort on his vocal cords. He was very small—short—and had long hair. His hair was all one length, with parts of it blond, others streaked red, all of it random.

Boiled took one look at the little man, then continued to scour his surroundings.

"It seems we're moving."

There was a sensation of gradual elevation. The whole container was being lifted up again.

"Don't you worry. Little Minty is a veteran crane operator." "The man in the cockpit?"

"The very same. Mincemeat the Wink. Used to be a bomber helicopter pilot. A famous pilot in the Commonwealth Forces, he was a proper macho little angel of death, raining down his showers of fire on the Continent."

"Where are you planning on taking me?" asked Boiled.

"We're just taking you aboard our ship. That's our home base, you see."

Boiled didn't ask any more questions. He made no move to put down the attaché cases in his hands but just stood there in silence, facing the little man.

"You're a real hunk, Mr. Boiled. Little Minty is quite the tough guy, but you're not bad yourself." The little man seemed fascinated by him. "I'm Rare the Hair, by the way. That's my *registered trademark* within the company."

He combed his hair upward with a flourish. His multicolored hair flowed like water through his fingers.

"Isn't my hair lovely?" Rare asked, tilting his thirty-odd-year-old face toward Boiled. His skin was abnormally smooth. It was white and appeared slippery, and when you looked closely it seemed to be composed of various different types. You couldn't quite see the patchwork, but there was no doubt that Rare was a modern-day Frankenstein's monster, born of the latest technology.

Boiled looked at Rare's eccentric person with an expression devoid of emotion.

"We're almost there. While we're waiting, I think I'm just going to go ahead and keep on gazing at your cute little poker face," Rare said in the clear voice of a little girl. The giant box they were in was slowly being lowered. There was almost no swaying now, but Boiled could tell that they were now atop a much bigger object.

"Oopsie, here we are. What a shame! I could have stared at your face all day long."

The door opened and another man entered. Blond hair, blue eyes, and gave the appearance of a successful businessman.

"I am sorry about this. Having to go through this rather elaborate charade. Do please take a seat, make yourself comfortable," the blond-haired man said.

"Ooh! And I'll sit next to him! That's okay, isn't it, Medi?" asked Rare.

The blond-haired man shooed Rare out of the way with a wave of his hand, as you would a dog.

Rare gave a cackle and leaped around the sofa in a circle like a little child at play.

"Welcome, Mr. Boiled. Given our respective professions, shall we dispense with the formalities of a handshake?"

The man went to sit on the sofa opposite Boiled, fluttering his hands as if to show them off. His fingers were unusually pristine. Each finger was prepared meticulously, nails well-manicured so that they were squeaky clean and sparkling, and then covered with a blue nail polish. But when you looked at them as a whole they seemed oddly mismatched.

"Medium the Fingernail is how I'm commonly known in this line of work. It's a nickname. Like the aliases university students use when they're looking for playmates online."

"I need confirmation of the results before I tender your remuneration," Boiled said. His hands were resting casually on the attaché cases.

Medium dropped his banter and undid his tie before unbuttoning his dress shirt.

Rare, now standing diagonally behind Boiled, gave an affected yelp and then mock-shyly covered his face with his hands.

Despite his squirming he was looking through his fingers, getting a good peek at Medium's rippling torso.

Boiled watched the scene play out, expressionless as ever. He looked at the pendants that adorned Medium's chest. Medium took these off and placed them on the table. Carefully, one by one, so that they didn't rest atop one another.

"Still alive," Medium said. "The metal cylinders used as the basis were for exchanging bodily fluids, and the metabolism is still there—they still regenerate. You can use them as decorations straight away. Even the nails grow properly and the skin flakes off as it should."

"From how many people?"

"Five right thumbs—Uncle Toms, I call them. If you take their prints you should find they fit exactly. Five brain surgeons—three male, two female. Just like you ordered, right?" Medium laughed amiably. Like a black marketeer boasting how scrupulously fair he was in his business dealings.

"Doctors' fingers are pretty rare and valuable, as far as they go. So I've taken the liberty of keeping one for myself. See—the pinky from this left hand. From one of the two female doctors' hands. Absolutely beautiful."

"Just the fingers?" asked Boiled disinterestedly. Medium laughed and shook his head.

Just then the man who had been operating the crane entered the container.

"Hey, Medi, I've finished loading the crates. The other guys hit our container and damaged it again, so I've sent the idiots a demand for compensation while I was at it."

He was suddenly at the side of the sofa. He was both bigger and taller than Boiled.

"Thanks for your hard work, Mincemeat. This is Mr. Boiled," said Medium.

"Yeah, we just met. How was my driving, not bad, eh?"

"Mincemeat, Rare, you two show Mr. Boiled your shares of the loot too," continued Medium.

"Ooh, even mine?" asked Rare.

"So, uh, you're interested in our collections, are you?"

Boiled stared at them quietly and said, "Just for confirmation."

"You mean from those doctors, don't you? Wait a sec, I'll fetch them for you *right* away." Rare slipped by Mincemeat and hopped away.

Mincemeat stood still and unzipped his fatigues. "Kayleigh and Linda. Girls should be kept

close to your heart, don't you think? And on my right breast, Daniel. Last, these guys on my left arm are Rick and Steve. These two seemed to be good buddies, so I planted them together. See, they're looking at each other."

It was as he said. The two eyes embedded in his left arm started blinking, as if they were staring at each other.

"I thought that doctors' eyes might have been cold and unfeeling, but as it turns out they're quite romantic. In particular this Linda—she seems to have taken quite a shine to this guy in my stomach, Rock, a big-shot lawyer."

"Ah, little Minty, that's just because of how your muscles developed after the transplants," said Medium.

"Don't be a spoilsport, Medi. Here, everyone, let me introduce you all to Mr. Boiled." Mincemeat flexed his muscles, squeezing tightly. The eyes, which had been winking away all over his body, opened their lids as one and turned to look at Boiled simultaneously.

Boiled stared back grimly. The eyes were neatly lined up in pairs, complete with lids, eyelashes, and tear ducts. A number of the eyes were red and swollen, as if they were crying for someone to release them.

"Sorry for keeping you all waiting—Gosh, little Minty! What a naughty boy you are!" Rare had bounded back into the room and was blushing bright red. "Here you go, here's mine! Five people's worth." Rare showed Boiled some pieces of skin and hair pressed between plates of glass, folded up neatly and soaked in liquid.

"None of them really take my fancy, to tell you the truth. The hectic lives they lived meant they didn't have much time to look after their hair, I suppose," continued Rare.

Boiled ignored him and turned to Medium. "And are there any of their parts that you discarded?"

"When they catch a whale on the continent they use up all the parts. I mean *all*—skin, bones, nothing goes to waste. The only part they discard is the *nothingness* left after the whale is gone, so to speak."

"And what do you use the parts for?" asked Boiled.

"The flesh is used for transplants, scientific research, as decoration—or as a delicacy," said Medium.

Rare giggled. "We sell them to people who really *get off* on the idea of eating human flesh."

Medium pointed at Rare as if to silence him. Pointing with a finger that could have come from anybody. "We get a good price for the bones, for marrow transplants, or to medical students. And the internal organs have long since been reserved. Even parts like appendixes," said Medium.

"And the parts that you've taken for personal use?" asked Boiled.

"We'd agreed that these were to be part of our payment…"

"That's fine, I just need confirmation."

"Well, it's all safe, everything's okay. They've all *vanished*. Not a single drop of blood left. Transplant technology advanced in leaps and bounds as a result of the war. There aren't going to be any leftovers. Three cheers all round," said Medium.

"And the data the doctors were working on?"

"We'll show you to our analysis department straightaway. Follow me, sir," Medium beckoned.

Boiled stood up and followed Medium deeper into the container, an attaché case in either hand.

"Ooh, that back—manly, but in a very different way than yours. And what smooth skin for a man!" Rare whispered to Mincemeat as they followed behind.

It was a giant container with a series of joints where it could be dismantled. Medium unlocked the electric lock on a door that divided two of these joints and headed in.

"Please do come in. This is the information HQ for our company. One of our members is a specialist in data management. In the war he was a distinguished Comms soldier—hey, Flesh! We have a guest!"

Inside were various computing and communication devices strewn all over the place. They walked through the gaps, tracing a route to a place surrounded by even more equipment, when some flabby mass wobbled round at them.

"Hey," said a sweet voice. His eyes were black and wet.

He had no hair and gave the impression of a young boy's head protruding from a mass of flesh.

"I've been watching you since you entered the port. Using the harbor cameras. Now *that's* probably the man we've been waiting for, I thought to myself. He's that sort of person, I thought," the mass of flesh croaked. He sounded like a precocious schoolboy.

"Indeed, Flesh. This is the iron man himself, Mr. Boiled. Be sure to treat our valued client with all the respect he deserves," said Medium.

"Welcome, sir. I'm Flesh the Pike. In charge of information ops." He pointed at himself with his right hand as he spoke. His hand was like a pale baby's hand that had been grotesquely overinflated. Boiled watched Flesh—and his hand—in silence.

Flesh was wearing something that at first glance looked like a gown, but on closer inspection turned out to be more like a giant sheet that covered his fleshy mass. There was an incredible amount of fat there—the word *obese* wasn't enough to describe it accurately.

The sheet was swollen into a bizarre shape. From the outside it was impossible to tell even whether he was sitting on a chair or was just sprawled out on the floor. He could have been standing.

Boiled put his attaché cases down and took a step toward Flesh. He stood in a position so that he could see a number of monitors all at once, then spoke.

"Show me the data. The neurotreatment reports that the five doctors were collaborating on."

"Just a moment." Flesh's whole body started trembling under the gown. As he stared at the screen his fat hands plugged something into the port that was embedded in the back of his neck at the top of his spinal column, his fingers moving with surprising agility. It didn't seem to be the sort of device that plugged into his brain tissue directly—rather it was a simple output device from his brain.

"It'll be a little while. We're covering our tracks as we go, you see, falsifying the University Hospital's data at the other end as we download them for ourselves. Wanna have some fun while we wait?" asked Flesh.

Boiled didn't say yes and he didn't say no.

Still, Flesh continued, looking up at Boiled with a drowsy expression. "I don't mind this man touching them. This man knows about our little hobbies, right, Medi?"

"Mr. Iron Man didn't seem to find anything too objectionable when I showed him mine—or when Rare or Mincemeat did," said Medium.

"That's what I thought, most probably." Flesh grinned. He fiddled around for a while loosening his gown with his chunky fingers. The gown fell to the floor, slowly, nonchalantly.

“Go on then, just a little. I don’t mind if you feel up my collection.” Flesh’s voice cracked as he made his mound of flesh wobble. A mountain of white meat swayed as one. Boiled could now see that they were women’s breasts. Hundreds of them.

Pairs of breasts protruded from his whole body—particularly his chest and stomach—clustered together like bunches of grapes.

Flesh wasn’t wearing any clothes under the gown. But he couldn’t really be described as naked, as there was no way of telling where his skin ended and where the stolen flesh began. His feet could just about be seen protruding, dangling, from under the mass, and it seemed that he was resting on some sort of easy chair. Breasts ran down both sides of his thighs and calves.

“Not interested. Just give me the data,” Boiled said. Flesh gave a creased smile and put his gown back on, nodding knowingly, glancing fleetingly at Medium.

“I like people who are honest about their tastes. To each his own, that’s what I always say,” said Flesh.

“We’re talking about Mr. Iron Man here, Fleshie. He’s not interested in your Oedipal complex. He likes his fetishes a little more hard-boiled, like me,” said Medium.

“So it seems.” The plug in Flesh’s back started flickering and making a chattering sound.

Flesh scanned the surrounding monitors with a quick flash of his eyes. As with breasts, he had hundreds of monitors, and they too were quivering, this time with lists of seemingly random numbers.

“Okay. All done.” Flesh reached out to one of the monitors. A machine that was evidently designated for writing data started whirring, and a disc popped out into Flesh’s portly fingers.

“Here you go. This is now the only copy of this data in the entire world.”

Boiled took the disc, lifted it up as if to look closer, and *squeezed*. Until the disc was no more than crumbs of plastic and magnetism.

The data—once the contents of Shell’s memory—was now oblivion.

“And the rest is silence,” said Medium. Boiled glanced at him.

Then, for the first time since entering the harbor, Boiled nodded.

04

"You must be growing weary of carrying those heavy bags around with you, sir. Won't you let us lighten your load?" Medium asked Boiled as they left the room, as if he were sharing a particularly witty joke.

"I was told that there were five members of this company. I'd like to hand it directly to your boss. Judging by the size of the exterior of the container, there should still be other rooms here. Where are they?" asked Boiled.

"Ah, our boss is not *at home* just this—"

"There's someone else inside this container right now. In the Comms Room just now I saw a record of the changes in mass aboard the container. There is someone I haven't met moving around inside."

"Well…it's not that we're trying to hide the boss exactly. It's just that he's in the middle of sorting through his collection, you see…" But Medium had accepted the inevitable and was leading Boiled toward another wall.

"You've got telecommunications equipment embedded in your heads, haven't you?" Boiled asked, and Medium turned around, startled. "And those eyes seem mechanized too. You're constantly circulating information between yourselves, are you?"

"Well, that's how we do business," Medium explained, and pressed the intercom buzzer on the wall.

–Have him enter.

The reply came immediately. There was suppressed laughter. A voice that evidently knew all about the exchange that had just passed between Boiled and Medium.

A section of the wall slid across, revealing the entrance to another room.

In the middle of the room was a man reclining on a leather chair, facing away from them. The chair turned.

"You're a proper pedigree hunting hound to have seen through our gang's little secret, Mr. Boiled," the man said, flashing his white teeth that contrasted beautifully with his dark skin. He was of the same race as Shell, but he had an almost inhuman air about him. He straightened up with a snap. His hair was short and he had a tattoo on his temple. He stared at Boiled with piercing eyes that belied the usually soft features particular to his race.

"To be able to identify the leader of a pack immediately—that's an important quality in a hunting hound. Looks like the Bandersnatch Company has found itself a worthy partner." As he spoke, he swung his left hand from the floor to the wall. He wore a single black glove on this hand. There was a golden chain on the back of his hand that jingled as he moved.

It was the sort of glove that could be used in bondage. It covered the pinky and ring finger, but the remaining fingers were exposed. These seemed to be the important fingers. He flicked them rapidly.

In response to this movement a table rose up from the floor, a sofa appeared, and a cocktail bar folded open from the wall. The hitherto empty room was now the very picture of a prosperous merchant's drawing room.

"Do sit."

Boiled did so. The two men now sat opposite each other. Medium headed toward the bar to assemble some glasses.

"I'm Welldone. My friends call me Well. A nickname, of course. Everyone here likes his nickname. One of the tricks for getting ahead in the underworld. By creating your own alias you make it easier to meet other *like-minded* people."

Welldone brought his hands together, the one with the glove and the one without, and grinned.

"The alias that I chose for myself is Welldone the Pussyhand."

"There's one set of *parts* that I've not seen yet. What does your gang do with them?" Boiled asked under his breath.

Still grinning, Welldone snapped his fingers. "Two dry martinis, Medi. Plenty of kick."

Then he showed Boiled the palm of his gloved hand. "I collect them all for myself. Male and female. But I sometimes sell them. I don't often transplant my collection onto myself. Reason being that I'm only looking for *the one*, and it's only the rare and exquisite pearl that interests me."

There was a silver zipper on the palm of his glove, and he unzipped it slowly.

Boiled watched with his unflinching poker face.

Behind the zipper, splitting his palm from top to bottom, was a vulva, lips ever-so-slightly apart. It was pink, and no pubic hair seemed to have been transplanted along with it.

Welldone took a finger from his right hand and slid it down the slippery crease, opening it up. Like another zipper.

A clitoris emerged from the top.

He tickled the red slit some more and it started giving off a shiny liquid.

"I've even got a proper vagina grafted into a crack in my flesh, so to speak. The urethra is, sadly, just for decoration. The owner—now, that's a secret, but suffice it to say that everything about her was like a rare jewel. I traveled around the world for her, to obtain her, and the technology needed to transplant her. And now I have her in my hands. Or should that be in my hand?" He grinned.

The sort of grin a ferocious beast might grin, one that concealed a razor-sharp bite.

"My pretty little pussy cat, so tight and so sensitive."

Welldone zipped his glove up again and received a cocktail from Medium, beckoning to Boiled to do the same. Boiled too took a glass in his hand, and looked back at Welldone.

"We don't shake hands in our line of work. Nevertheless, we can raise a glass and drink to the demise of our mutual enemies," Welldone said, and clinked glasses with Boiled before downing his drink in one gulp and placing his glass on the table. "Let's take this opportunity to seal a deal—we'll make your future contracts a *priority* from now on."

Boiled finished his drink in silence. He then placed one of the attaché cases on the table. "Your reward."

Medium collected it stealthily and took a step back from the table. He checked its contents and glanced at Welldone's back. Welldone nodded without turning. Welldone went on to explain that all five of the company members, not just he and Medium, were linked by communication devices planted in their heads. "We're each other's eyes, ears, and weapons. That's what gives us our strength."

Boiled placed the other case on the table and opened it himself. "An advance payment and to cover your costs for your next target."

Welldone leaned forward to sniff the case like a dog. "How many people?"

"One—although there are two PIs as Trustees, and the civilian police force will do their bit to interfere," said Boiled.

"So why are you offering us so little?"

"Because you'll find the target to your taste. Dispose of the target's body as you like."

Welldone lifted a disc out of the case between two fingers, suspiciously.

"What's this?" he asked.

"A video featuring the target." Boiled stared at Welldone, unflinching.

Medium moved to his side and received the video. "We'll check now, all five of us." He snapped his fingers. This time a different wall opened up, revealing a large TV screen.

Rare and Mincemeat entered the room and sat down on the sofa as Medium stuck the disc into the player. Flesh was able to watch the same video from his own room.

Nobody spoke, but the sense of excitement was palpable. They were about to acquire a new target.

Soon the video began. The picture was noticeably grainy; it was obviously a cheap flick. As a movie it was barely watchable, but when the girl appeared the gang were glued to their seats.

They watched the girl as she lay still and was *used* every which way, and suddenly the room was full of the most unbearable tension.

"Nice fingers she has on her." Medium was the first to speak once the first scene was over. "Innocent and yet…supple. I've wanted a better pinky on my right hand for some time…"

Rare was next to speak. "Magnificent hair. Her skin looks wonderful too. I want her. I want her badly." His voice was shrill.

"Want her eyes for my arm. Such sharp, clear pupils. Like an angel," Mincemeat said. He was breathing heavily. "I'll say good morning to them every day when I wake. Then I'll kiss those eyelids."

Cute, aren't they? came Flesh's voice over some hidden speakers. *A wonderful pair. I'd like them on my inner thighs. I'd give them a little shot of hormones every day, so that they press up more and more against my bits…*

"Hmm…" Welldone surveyed the rest of the gang, but he too was drawn back into the video when the second man clambered on top of the girl to enter her.

"See here…can we get a closeup? That's it, right there. Now let's see what she's like inside. This pussycat might even be good enough to be part of my right hand. I've been looking for a *scissor sister* for my left hand for some time now, she needs her sweet loving… What's this? I see, I see…"

This was how they all spoke to each other for some time. Admiring their new target and talking in graphic detail about what they wanted to do with her. They were all incredibly excited.

After some time, Welldone turned to Boiled. "When did you say this video was taken?"

"About half a year ago."

"What do we have on her at the moment?"

"We have footage from the courtroom and photos," said Boiled. Welldone took out a pile of photos from the case and passed them around.

"Wonderful! So—what is it exactly that you want?" asked Welldone. Boiled didn't answer, and Welldone looked back at him silently.

"This was the real target all along, wasn't it? The five doctors were just the *amuse-bouche*, and this is the *main course*. So what is it that you want with this girl?"

"Nothing. To have the target annihilated completely. Give me the *nothingness* that's left after her life has disappeared."

When Welldone heard these words his face turned into a broad smile. "Thus spake the ultimate fetishist! It looks like in Mr. Boiled we've happened across our ideal partner."

"The time limit is three days. We can't wait any longer than that. The moment it looks like you're not going to complete your mission in time, we'll terminate the contract on the spot."

"Don't you worry, Mr. Boiled. The pack of hounds that you've chosen—Bandersnatch—are the best hunting dogs in the business." Welldone was now a bundle of pure desire.

Boiled rose from his seat.

When he left the ship he headed straight for the car park without looking back.

The new moon was sharp as a razor, shining down its blue light over the gatehouse.

"Any luck, sir?" It was still the same young security guard on duty. He ran Boiled's card through the system again. "Anyhow, good luck with the case, sir."

Boiled nodded in silence.

He set a course for the East Side.

05

"It's completely unacceptable! Beyond the pale!" Oeufcoque was pointing his finger and—unusually for him—yelling furiously. "An absolute 'no way'! No questions asked. Have you got that, Balot?"

–I'm sorry, don't get mad at me! I'll never lift you up by your tail again.

"I don't even like discussing it! It's like my whole person is being judged and found wanting. Just leave my tail alone in *every way*, please."

–I'm sorry. I'll do that. So please stop being so angry?

Oeufcoque lowered the finger he was pointing at her, and eventually his hips followed suit with a thump.

He was on the palm of Balot's hand. She was using her other hand to hold a bath towel to her chest.

"As long as you understand, it's okay."

–I didn't realize it would upset you so much.

"I don't know why I got so angry myself."

–You're still angry.

"Yes, but it's fine. I'll stop taking it out on you."

–Why don't you just keep it hidden in your pants? Why do you have a hole on purpose so that you can stick your tail out?

"I think I just asked you to drop it!"

–You also said you'd stop taking it out on me.

"You need a full account, is that it? Very well, then. Out of the many designs of pants that there are, my favorite design happens to have a hole in the—" Oeufcoque cut himself off for a second, throwing his arms in the air out of frustration. "That bloody Doctor, saying things like *Don't you think those pants make your backside look big*, or *Be careful where you park that thing, it needs warning lights*—he's given me such a complex about my magnificent tail!"

Balot did her best to stop herself, but in the end she couldn't help bursting out into silent laughter.

"Don't laugh at me, I'm begging you…" Oeufcoque pleaded with a pathetic expression.

This only made her laugh even more. She doubled over, holding her towel to her stomach now.

"Anyway, shouldn't you be thinking about your own clothes rather than worrying about my pants? Unlike me you don't even have any proper hair on your body. You'll catch a cold if all you wear is a single towel."

Balot's whole body was shaking along with her laughter, but she managed a small nod.

"And the Doctor's waiting for us too."

–Can you wait for* me*, though? I'm in pain. I'm laughing too much.

"Still laughing? Well, I'm so delighted that I could be of service in this way—I'm glad I amuse you."

–Stop sulking.

"I'm not sulking!"

–Of course you aren't. Sorry.

Balot wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and kissed Oeufcoque on his tail.

"Was that a peace offering? Very well, I accept. Now, considering the real and present danger facing your health, let's move on to a mission to acquire appropriate clothing for you."

–Thank you.

Balot stood up and let her towel fall to the floor. She lifted Oeufcoque up carefully with both hands and *snarced* him with feeling. Oeufcoque, with his usual squelch, melted in Balot's hand and widened and slithered to cover her whole body.

Oeufcoque wrapped the stark naked Balot from top to toe. A black bodysuit covered her from her fingertips to the ends of her toes. Both of her palms were stuck together, as Oeufcoque couldn't *turn* into two things at once.

Balot peeled her hands apart with the gentlest of motions. Savoring the sensation of the bodysuit—comfortable, flexible, tight—she went to take a peek at herself in the mirror.

She was a little disappointed.

–It's not very stylish.

"Maybe not, but it *is* heatproof, coldproof, shockproof, pressure-resistant—and can magnify your *snarc*. Oh, and there's a zipper at the back, so please use that to take me off when I'm *turned out*."

–Doesn't it come in any other designs?

"You can modify the design as you like, all you have to do is think about it—but let's not get bogged down with the trivial stuff just now."

–*You get bogged down with trivial stuff like your pants*, Balot answered back as she put on her boots.

She left her room and headed toward the elevator. The giant building, the former mortuary, was in fact full of rooms that were formerly used as morgues—and, therefore, despite the size of the place, not much of it was serviceable as living quarters.

Balot used the elevator used for *goods arrivals* to head down and got off at the underground garage, where she noticed a number of gasoline-fueled cars.

The red convertible was there too.

–Did you make these cars yourself, Oeufcoque?

"Yup, apart from the license plates, the gas, and a couple specialist patented parts. Took me the best part of the month to make a single vehicle. I'm very meticulous about my designs—it's the artist in me."

–I wish the artist in you was meticulous about the designs for my clothes.

"Uh…sure, well, let's focus on our training for now, that's our first priority."

They entered into the garage proper, and by one of the walls they saw the Doctor, piling up some complicated-looking machinery.

He smiled as he saw Balot come toward him.

"Isn't it great? Using the funds we requested for your Life Preservation Program I was able to source some first-class diagnostic equipment, tinker around with it, and polish it up into *these*. These beauties knock the training equipment used in the Major Leagues right out of the water!"

Balot *snarced* the throat of her suit, producing a crystalline sound.

–Looks like everyone's an artist.

She looked around at the machinery, somewhat nonplussed.

"It's important to be *artistic* now and then if you're going to enjoy your life—the trick is to stop just before you end up on the wrong side of *autistic*." The Doctor was in his element, able to fiddle with his machines to his heart's content. "Are those clothes Oeufcoque?"

"That's right, Doc. And I was told off by Balot for not being *artistic* enough in my own designs," said Oeufcoque.

The Doctor nodded in agreement. "Get her to teach you some style, then. Now, Balot, I'm going to stick these on you, okay?"

The Doctor showed her some circular stickers. Balot nodded, and the Doctor started placing them all over her—knees, elbows, back.

–What are these things?

"Designed to send your biorhythmic data straight to this machine. They'll capture your movements with a margin of error of less than 0.1 millimeters. Now, could you move around a bit? Do some stretches, that sort of thing."

The Doctor took a seat in a pipe chair and balanced a laptop on his knees. Multicolored cords extended from the back of the monitor and plugged into the sprawling machinery.

Balot moved as requested. Some warm-ups. She *snarced* the suit here and there as she limbered up. A few patterns started appearing on the suit and eventually formed themselves into what could be described as a rough design, complete with colors.

Balot still didn't seem satisfied, exactly, but at least she was getting there.

"You're pretty limber," Oeufcoque said as Balot performed a split, backside now on the floor. He seemed impressed.

Balot smiled and, from the same position on the floor, leaned forward until her chest touched the ground. From that position she spread her arms toward her feet, deftly touching the tips of her toes.

"Well, that's one skill I don't have. We have ourselves a bona fide gymnast!"

–I just like physical activity. It makes me feel like I'm in charge of my body.

She spoke without the electronic voice box, communicating with Oeufcoque directly.

"The Doctor calls me unfit because I can't run twenty meters in less than a minute."

Balot chuckled as she got back up.

–Would you like me to keep moving around?

The Doctor shook his head as he pounded on the keys, relentlessly entering new data. "No, we're okay. Now, could you just stand on that platform there? Yeah, the one in front of those contraptions."

Balot did as she was asked and stepped up onto the silver platform.

It too had a number of wires running from it. It turned out it was some sort of scale. A small display on one of the corners of the platform revealed some numbers, with the numerals to the right of the decimal blinking and changing rapidly.

A number of other displays could be seen, each flashing up different sets of numerals.

Balot looked somewhat sullen and turned to the Doctor with a puzzled scowl.

"I've taken some scales that they use to weigh baggage in an airport and modified them so that they can display biorhythmic indices as well. This thing's accurate down to the last milligram and can pick up everything from your circulation to body fat percentages."

–That's the sort of thing you should have told me before I got on!

"Huh?"

–It's indecent.

The Doctor looked suitably chastened.

Oeufcoque's laughter could be heard emanating from Balot's left hand.

"Don't be like that, please. Any sort of proper training needs an observer on the sidelines to measure the progress."

–In that case, Doctor, I'll just have to think of you as part of the furniture.

"That's not much better…" the Doctor grumbled.

–Very* nice *furniture, of course.

Balot was teasing him now.

–I'll let you tell me whatever you need to say.

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders, but Balot could tell he was playing along now. She laughed and looked at the numbers on the indices.

The numbers to the right of the decimals whirled around when she shifted her balance from foot to foot. When she stabilized, the numbers started changing much more slowly, but she still couldn't get them to stand completely still.

"Ahem," the Doctor coughed, ready to start. "Your skin was originally developed to withstand the weightlessness of space vacuum, to allow you to move freely without losing your equilibrioception."

Balot nodded and watched the figures on the displays.

"Parts of your brain—in particular your cerebellum—work by receiving these electronic impulses, which are constantly processed and updated. Your sensory nerves act as neural pathways, as in a normal person, but as a result of your new abilities the time it takes to transfer this information is drastically reduced—or, to put it another way, your brain is accelerated many times over. So, theoretically you can use your *snarc* both outwardly and *from the outside in*."

Balot nodded. She was keen to know the as-yet-undiscovered areas of the abilities she had acquired.

"Should be a piece of cake, considering the incredible aptitude you've shown so far."

–What should be?

"Achieving equilibrium. You need to be able to grasp—precisely and evenly—the details of your interior workings, just as much as what's going on outside your body. In other words, the definition of 'training' for you is not so much a case of building up your muscles but instead to cultivate your sense of internal balance."

–So what is it exactly you want me to do?

"Make those scales stop still on a single number."

Balot looked at the digits again. The numbers that were spinning round and round.

She could easily *snarc* them in order to give the Doctor what he asked for.

But that wasn't quite what the Doctor was after.

"You need to *let go* in order to *get go*," Oeufcoque interrupted. "Try and get a grasp of how your body *ought to be* in the context of its environment. You should be able to feel exactly what your body needs to do in order to adapt to its maximum effectiveness."

***–Is that what you do when you* turn?**

"Exactly. Your genetic makeup is very different from mine, but the basic principles are the same."

–Genetic makeup?

"Look, you don't need to think too hard about it. All you need to do is feel it."

Balot looked away from the numbers on the scales and stared into space.

She thought about how she felt when she first woke up inside this building. How she could sleep without feeling uneasy about her surroundings for the first time ever. How that was what she wanted—what she needed—with all her heart.

Balot closed her eyes.

She focused on her consciousness—until now only ever used to explore her surroundings—and turned part of it inward.

She felt her own rhythm, the pulse running through her whole body. She felt the sensation of understanding her inner workings at the most fundamental level. This was something that didn't belong to anyone else—it was hers.

The external and internal gently connected in her consciousness. She could feel changes in her body and changes on the weighing scales with equal precision. Through Oeufcoque she could feel the flow of the air, and she *grasped* the layout of the entire garage. She could feel the shapes of the parked cars, the thickness of the supporting pillars and the walls, and even the electricity in the air as it flowed through her body.

She grasped her own tiniest movements, fractions of a millimeter.

Behind Balot's back the Doctor kept his eyes glued to the screen—and she could sense him growing more and more excited. The Doctor was astonished and delighted in equal measure.

"Amazing—how wonderful to have my own inventions brought properly to life by a genius such as you!" But even as the Doctor spoke, she sensed a faint echo of remorse.

It suddenly occurred to Balot that she had never really given much thought to the question of what all these inventions were originally intended for.

–Don't you like wars, Doctor?

She spoke with her eyes still closed.

Behind her the Doctor lifted his head.

"Well, no, of course not… Although, ironically, we're talking about technology that was originally developed under a remit from high command in order to help soldiers fight in space more effectively, so that they could engage in hand-to-hand combat even when they were wearing their bulky space suits."

–So why did you make all this?

"You know, I really had convinced myself that I was contributing to human progress, even to world peace. Although my wife and relatives all just thought I was a nut job obsessed with my quest to restructure the human body…"

–But you're going to save me.

Balot's eyes were still shut.

The Doctor chuckled. "Let's hope so. Now, on to the next step!"

Balot opened her eyes.

The numbers were no longer moving, not even slightly.

She could now see exactly how they *did* move, and what she needed to do with her body to make them move—or stay still.

She spread her legs apart.

Still the numbers stayed the same.

Balot felt confident now—if the scales were fifty meters long and she was told to run from one end to the other, she knew she'd be able to do so and the numbers would barely flicker.

"Are you right-handed?" Oeufcoque asked.

–I am now, although I was born left-handed.

And then, after answering, she *snarced* just to Oeufcoque:

–I was told I needed to make myself right-handed, as some customers might feel uncomfortable around a southpaw.

"So, is it safe to say you could be ambidextrous when it came to handling weapons?"

–I guess I could get used to it, after a little practice.

"Then let's start with the left. Let's get a gun in your hand."

Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque via her left hand.

Even though she'd never handled a gun before, she could tell that Oeufcoque was *turning* into the ideal model for her, the one that suited her grip the best out of all the models he had programmed into him.

The fabric on her palm *turned* with a squelch and she felt cold steel—and gripped it.

It was heavier than she'd expected—but her body soon adjusted to the extra weight.

Oeufcoque gave her some tips. "Parts of this are made from vulcanized plastic and some electronics, but basically this is just an automatic pistol. You pull the trigger, the gunpowder explodes, and the bullet goes flying out the end at high velocity."

Balot nodded and leveled the gun. The grip was fused into the palm of her suit.

She tried letting go, twiddling her fingers, and it still didn't fall. It felt like it was almost a part of her.

"The target's set up over on that wall." The Doctor pointed at it. A black cardboard cutout, the shape of a man, about 170 centimeters in height.

"We have pressure sensors set up all around the target, so we'll be able to tell immediately where your shots land. You watched the video on how to fire a gun? Well, go ahead and try it for yourself."

The gun was empty of bullets. Balot *snarced* it. She felt a click, and she knew that the steel chamber was now loaded with a bullet. She could *grasp* the addition of the extra weight in the chamber, down to the last milligram.

Click, click, and one by one the magazine filled with bullets.

Eleven shots total—with an extra one in the chamber for good measure.

She thrust her left arm forward, used her right arm to steady it, and readied her gun.

She leaned in to compensate for the force, maneuvering herself into prime firing position, just as she had seen in the instructional video.

She brought her finger to rest on the trigger.

A little electronic gimmick on the trigger saw to it that all she needed to do was to grip gently rather than pull the trigger hard—she hardly needed to put any strength into it at all.

Bang, a hollow explosive sound.

A bullet flew out of the muzzle, and a spent casing flew sideways out of the chamber. A piercing sound could be heard on the other side of the wall. A metallic clang on the floor followed.

She fired more shots.

One shot, two shots, three shots.

She could have pushed the sound of the gunshots inside Oeufcoque, silencing them completely, but that would have dulled the visceral sensations of the whole experience.

Yes, for the real marksmanship experience, you really needed to have noise echoing all around you.

She fired six shots to gain her bearings. The next five she fired with her eyes completely closed. The car park reverberated with the sound of gunfire, and the empty cartridge shells played a merry jangling tune as they clattered across the ground.

She could even feel the sensation that the bullets themselves felt, that of being shot out of the barrel of the gun. Wrenched out of place, jumping out of the barrel, rotating with tremendous speed.

The numbers on the scales that Balot was standing on twitched slightly, but in a moment they settled and became virtually still.

Balot had finished firing her first load. The breechblock slid back and stopped in place.

"Don't reload it right away—drop the magazine to release some of the heat that's built up."

Balot did as Oeufcoque said and *snarced* the grip of the gun into ejecting the magazine.

Balot relaxed as the magazine hit the scales. The subtlest of movements. The spent magazine hit the silver platform and rolled across it.

The numbers on the display didn't change in the slightest.

Balot *snarced* the gun again.

A new magazine appeared inside the grip, a perfect fit.

The gun loaded with bullets as she moved herself back into position, and at the same time the breechblock snapped back into place.

She relaxed her shoulders and fired again. Settling into a regular rhythm. From the first to the last shot, like a pulse.

She felt the incandescent bullets piercing the air.

After she had fired all the bullets she ejected the magazine again and turned around to look at the Doctor.

The Doctor was glued to the monitor.

His fingers covered his mouth as if he were in deep thought, and then he suddenly exhaled, letting out the huge breath that he had been holding in.

"Perfect. You've really studied the videos closely, haven't you?"

–Yes, both the ones where you stand still and where you fire while moving. Also the ones with moving targets, as well as stationary ones.

"Great. Moving targets next, then. Some balls will start flying across randomly from beyond that pillar over there. A bit like a pitching machine, the sort kids use for baseball practice. Shoot those balls down. Same distance as before."

–Got it.

Balot quickly—and smoothly—equipped herself with a new magazine and bullets and got into position.

The Doctor started tapping his keyboard.

Balot realized that these actions controlled the machine on the other side of the pillar.

Boing, and a rubber ball flew out.

Balot shot it.

In a little less than four seconds, that one ball had taken all twelve of the bullets.

The rubber ball performed a whirling dance in midair, and the fragments flew off every which way.

The scales barely flickered, and the golden cartridges gleamed as they scattered across the floor.

Again Balot dropped the magazine and turned to the Doctor. His eyes were like saucers as he watched the distant particles from the ball fragment further.

"Er…the idea was that you try to shoot down each ball—that's to say shoot, *singular*, just the once." Yet again the Doctor was dumfounded.

Just then another ball bounced out of the machine.

Balot's attention was still half focused on the Doctor as she raised her hand. Just her left this time—her right hand dangling by her side.

She *snarced* Oeufcoque in an instant, re-equipping herself with a magazine and bullets.

She fired a single shot, just as she was told.

The ball bounced against the wall and came bounding back toward them, then rolled another twenty meters or so before stopping at the Doctor's shoes.

There were eight balls total, including the one that Balot had obliterated earlier.

Before long seven of those balls rolled into position right at the Doctor's feet. Balls that had been shot through their cores with deadly accuracy.

The Doctor picked one of them up and looked at it, jaws trembling. "We're talking about spherical targets here. To pierce the cores with one hundred percent accuracy, and from this distance too…"

He sounded as if he were ready to raise the white flag of surrender, but then laughed and said at a high pitch, "How absolutely *thrilling* !"

He shut his mouth as soon as he opened it, very aware that he was getting carried away.

Balot frowned.

–I thought you didn't like war?

"Yes, but this is something completely different," Oeufcoque interjected.

The Doctor nodded. "I've never actually been at the front lines, you see. I might seem a little warlike, but in my heart I know I'm not about to go to war anytime soon."

Balot pursed her lips. An expression that was somewhere between sympathy and disapproval.

"Right, let's have you moving now. Try walking toward that target. There are some more pitching machines positioned behind those pillars. They'll sense your movements and fire balls directly at you—shoot them down. Consider the balls to be an attack on your person."

–Got it.

Balot stepped off the silver scale. Without missing a beat she walked toward the wall at the far end.

She perceived the machines operating to her left and right. Her concentration levels were rising. She looked inside herself to manipulate her internal workings—so that her pulse wouldn't start racing—all the while keeping a close check on her surroundings.

The moment she sensed movement in the shadows Balot pointed her gun in that direction without looking. By the time the ball had left the machine Balot had already fired.

The ball hurtled toward the flight path of the bullet as if it were being sucked in and was skewered perfectly.

Balot felt the other machines firing up but walked on steadily. A volley of balls converged on

her from all directions. She shot them all down, having found her target before the balls even left the pitching machines.

The Doctor cranked up the speed. Balot held her steady pace, unabated. She took her right hand off the gun and *snarced* that hand too.

Another gun appeared, just like the one in her left hand. She used this to fire at the balls too. Left and right. Whichever she could use to aim—and fire—the quicker.

She arrived at the far wall, turned around, and began her return.

The sound of gunfire echoed all around, balls and spent cartridges littered the floor, and the acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air. Her vision was clouded by the gun smoke.

Balot closed her eyes. She looked as if she were about to go into a trance. She fired her gun, playfully now, almost as if she were dancing.

Balot's eyes were closed, and she never missed a shot.

The Doctor, on the other hand, grew paler and paler, the blood draining from his face.

"I know what *ought* to be done, I just don't know what the *right thing to do* is… I never imagined in a million years that the girl would mesh so well with the abilities we gave her…" A shiver ran down his spine as he spoke, and his voice was drowned out by the echoing gunfire.

The Doctor gulped, and as he did so there was a *ping*—a message had arrived.

"We've just had a newsflash from the DA. I set him to gather information on Shell—anything on the net or from internal police reports," the Doctor said.

Balot took a seat, listening. She had already detached both guns from her sleeves and handed them over to the Doctor, and when she did so his expression lifted ever so slightly in relief.

"He's come up with something, has he?" Oeufcoque asked, sticking his torso out of one of Balot's hands.

"The five neurosurgeons who were looking after Shell have all disappeared. Every single one of them, simultaneously. One of the surgeons had even just prepared dinner. No signs of a struggle. And no witnesses…" The Doctor's eyes flicked over to Balot.

She understood the significance of this glance straightaway.

–Don't worry. I won't be afraid. Carry on.

"Okay. Well, it's strange. All five of them have these large sums of money deposited into their accounts by an unidentified source. But considering the salaries they're on from the state, it'd hardly be worthwhile for any of them to abscond with the sorts of sums we're talking about—not with all they have to lose."

"The deposits are obviously a red herring, Doc. Boiled doesn't do things by halves. Once his mind is set on an effective course of action, he carries it through to the bitter end. I imagine he hired professionals to do the job. Whenever we find something that looks like a lead, it's safe to assume that it's more likely to be a decoy, or a deliberate bluff," said Oeufcoque.

"I think you're right. Well, I'm going to use these mysterious disappearances to press our case further, try and crank up the Life Preservation Program to the highest level. We strike a blow inside the courtroom, they go on the offensive on the outside. We'll need to shore up our escape routes—and we may need to start scouting for a new hideaway. I'd better go and negotiate with the Broilerhouse directly."

Even as he spoke his fingers were tapping away at the keyboard furiously. He was evidently in communication with the DA.

There was another *ping*, and the Doctor's expression brightened.

"Marvelous, our man at the Broilerhouse has given the go-ahead to open negotiations. I'd better head straight there…hope we don't get attacked while I'm out. Mind you, even if I was here, I doubt I'd be much help in battle."

"Well, we've vetted the police protection that we were assigned after the trial, and their histories all check out. We trawled through the files for all eight of them, spanning the last twenty years—spotless. They should be able to protect us for long enough for you to have your Life Preservation Program discussions, at least," said Oeufcoque.

"Let's hope so. Still, let's not discount the possibility that the enemy will see my absence as a window of opportunity to attack. Be careful." The Doctor flicked a switch on the machine, pulled the cord out, and headed over to the red convertible in giant, lanky strides.

"Right, I'm off. Make sure you lock all the doors. And listen to what Oeufcoque tells you." He called out to Balot and the car left the parking lot, letting in the crimson light of the evening sun from beyond the shutters.

Balot *snarced* the shutters closed, and then made the pitching machines set themselves up to fire automatically. She was about to recommence her training.

"Best not tire yourself out," Oeufcoque advised.

–Let me go on a little while longer, please? It takes the edge off my mood.

"Fine, but don't overexert yourself."

–Just a bit of stationary target practice, then.

Balot stepped back on top of the silver platform and gripped the gun with both hands. She fired in time with the balls as they flew toward her.

She fired with her right, she fired with her left.

As she did so, she *snarced* Oeufcoque to ask him some questions.

–Who's going to attack us? Your former partner?

"I don't know. And we don't know for sure that anyone's going to attack us."

–Did Shell have those surgeons rubbed out? Why?

"Something to do with the business deal he's involved in at the moment, no doubt. It's probably safe for us to assume that Shell's memories are being recorded and preserved in physical form somehow. That's given us a useful clue, anyway."

–Who do you think actually killed the surgeons?

"A gang of professionals, I imagine. The sort who work as a team, kidnappers-for-hire."

–Do you think they'll come and attack us?

"It's highly probable."

–And if they do attack?

"Then our police protection should send them packing."

–But what if the kidnappers get them too?

"Then it'll be up to us to finish the job."

–We kill them? Balot asked as she pulled the trigger.

–I should shoot the people who attack me, like this, is that what you want? Like I shoot that ball over there?

"If it becomes necessary then yes, you shoot your assailant in self-defense. But that's not the same thing as shooting them *in order to kill them*." Oeufcoque was in full-blown lecture mode now.

–Okay.

"Let's take a rest now."

–No, I'm still good. Just a little longer, please?

Balot was firing away on complete autopilot now, mind completely blank and free from obstructive thoughts.

Slowly, at the back of her mind, the question posed by the counsel for the defense re-emerged.

Why didn't you resist?

That was what the attorney had asked her. Just as so many men had asked her before.

The answer was silence.

There had never been any answer other than silence.

Ever.

Except that now there was sound to rip apart that silence—the sound of gunfire.

Balot continued firing the gun.

06

The gasoline-powered van cruised around the neighborhood, the airline logo on the front and Meet and Greet plastered in large lettering on the window.

By and by it arrived at its destination. It parked, and two tall men emerged from it.

Both men wore sunglasses and thick coats.

"Five minutes, Medium. Let's secure the area," one said.

The other nodded. "Roger that, Welldone. Moving into position now." As he spoke he walked directly toward the entrance of the residence.

Left hand in his jacket, he pressed the intercom buzzer with his right hand and whispered, "I'll tidy up here as Well prepares the radar. You've finished hacking the telephone line?" Medium pressed his forehead with his hand, tilting his head, listening to a voice meant only for him.

A noise came from inside the house, and he smiled.

And so it was that Boiled's hounds—the Bandersnatch Gang—were released.

A sound over the intercom:

–What do you want?

"This is your transport shuttle from the airline company, sir. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

–We never ordered any…

But the hand that had been inside Medium's coat was out now. It held a card-shaped device.

He stuck the card into the electronic lock on the door.

An electromagnetic Hutchinson Knife appeared from his other sleeve, as if by magic.

It all happened in an instant.

The door opened with a click. A thick security chain dangled across the door, but the knife sliced through it like butter, its magnetized blade causing a link in the chain to fuse and shatter.

The door opened and Medium entered. The man who had been speaking into the intercom was standing there in the entrance hall, his face blank with astonishment and terror.

Yo—he started to say, but Medium threw a knife at him, and it plunged into his open mouth. The magnetized blade sliced through the back of his head, causing all the moisture in his mouth to evaporate in an instant.

Medium caught the already-dead man by his lapel and propped him up to stop his fall. He pulled the knife out and carefully laid the man's body down. Not a drop of blood was spilled, but instead the whole area was filled with the pungent smell of burnt flesh.

There was the tinkle of a bell, and a red light glinted off his eyes behind his sunglasses.

"What is it? What's that car? And that smell…" A voice.

Medium's eyes, now vermilion, glanced at the wall and saw another figure emerge.

Left hand still gripping the knife, Medium let his right arm hang loose by his hips.

"I wonder which one of us is the faster draw," Medium said aloud. He smirked and stood deliberately in the middle of the corridor. The other man appeared from beyond the door and was immediately taken aback by the figure confronting him—and the two red eyes behind the sunglasses.

The man, frenetic, reached for the gun at his side. He was too slow.

Medium unsheathed his gun and fired a shot that left the barrel almost noiselessly. A hole

opened in the man's chest. The electric charge from the bullet fried his wound—and his lungs—and he collapsed in a heap before a sound could pass his lips.

Again, no blood, and again the smell of fried flesh hung in the air.

"That'll be me, then." Medium leaned over the corpse and lectured the dead body in jest, waggling his index finger.

Medium put his gun away and lifted up the man's wrist, staring fixedly at it. "Tough, professional fingers," he said, taking his sunglasses off with his knife-wielding hand. "Just not really *sexy* enough. Let's sell them off, Well."

He was speaking now to Welldone, who emerged from the opposite end of the corridor.

Well was dragging yet another dead body by the scruff of its neck.

He took his sunglasses off, exposing his computerized red pupils, and spoke. "Three people exactly. We've cleaned up over here. How's it going over there, Rare, Mincemeat?" Welldone spoke out loud, hand to his temple. The reply came:

–All done. Easy peasy! I'm just brewing myself some nice coffee in the kitchen. Rare's girly voice sounded in Welldone's and Medium's ears and continued:

–It was a little boring, actually. The pigs were stationed exactly where we knew they'd be when we hacked their Ham & Egg system.

"Good…standby on alert."

–All finished over here too. Looks like our tracking system's working. When should I bring this pig out?

It was Mincemeat's voice that now arrived on the scene, and Welldone responded. "Wait for darkness. We're going to scramble all the Ham & Egg circuits in the area, along with all communications to and from the target house."

–Am I good to soil *them a bit, then?*

"Why,

what's happened, little Minty?" Medium asked, amused.

–There was a woman here too. They were trying to pass themselves off as a couple, but they're both Ham & Eggers. Still, might have been a real-life couple, I suppose.

"Are they still alive, Mincemeat?" asked Welldone. He left the house and moved toward the car.

–Er…should they be?

"Not really. Do as you please. Just be sure you factor in enough time to tidy up afterwards."

"Twenty minutes till sunset, little Minty. The sun's almost down. Time for dinner." Medium spoke now, standing in the hallway. He heard Mincemeat's laughter echoing deep in his ear.

–More of a snack. I'll leave the front parts *for Well. Can't imagine they'll be to your taste, though. I'm going to do the* rear parts *myself, now, husband and wife in turn.*

Mincemeat carried on cheerfully, and Medium burst out laughing. "Rare's going to be all jealous…"

–Ooh, Medi, no, you know how loud I get! I just can't keep it in. If I did anything now our target would know we were coming! I don't like it unless I can scream real loud.

"Just don't forget we need some time to load the pigs," Welldone said as he returned with a suitcase in either hand. "Consume the prey without leaving a single drop of blood. That's the secret of our success, after all."

"That's right, business is business, Rare, little Minty. Don't let the pigs rot." Medium took a

suitcase from Welldone and knelt down by one of the corpses.

Welldone extracted the Lockbuster Card from the door and reset the lock. "Just don't forget that you're on the battlefield, Rare and Mincemeat."

–That's what makes it feel so good*, though! Isn't that right, little Minty?*

–Yeah, it's good. It's really good!

Medium shook his head, laughing, and cut off his transmission from Mincemeat. "Looks like being on the battlefield just increases the thrill factor for them. Give us a hand, will you, Well? Let's slice this pig up with our two-hundred-thousand-dollar butter knives."

Welldone kneeled beside the corpse and took his Hutchinson Knife out, applying it to the corpse's wrists. Flesh, skin, and bone were all sliced off together, but not a single drop of blood escaped.

"Easy does it. You know that red convertible we just passed—do you think he's one of the PIs too?" Medium spoke cheerfully, and Well grinned back.

"He is. I had Flesh confirm it. So all we've got to do now is give the other PI a little scratch with our butter knives and then put the girl to sleep and bring her back with us."

"My chest is pounding. It's been a while. I'm almost as excited as that first time we ever set out as a gang."

Welldone laughed. The two men cheerfully dissected the body and packed it away in the suitcases.

≡

"Looks like the operation will commence in twenty minutes." Inside the container on the trailer, Flesh wobbled his gelatinous body around toward Boiled as he spoke to him.

"Perfect timing."

Boiled nodded his approval.

The container was full of machinery. Mincemeat was the trailer's driver, and it was currently parked some distance away from the residential district.

"I'll finish my work on the *Ham & Egg* circuits in a couple of minutes. Each of the three residences are set up so that if they don't successfully send and receive a transmission from each of the others every forty-five minutes, the emergency alarm is sounded automatically. So I've had to fix it so that each one relays a message on to the next one every fifteen minutes."

Boiled nodded again. His eyes were fixed on a monitor that showed a detailed image of the neighborhood. A number of flashing lights showed where Welldone and the rest of the gang were at that precise moment.

The next monitor along showed a building in 3-D. With perfect marking—radar devices set in three places around the building—they were able to triangulate and get a precise scan of its contents.

"It's built just as it says on the blueprints. Have you ever been inside the building yourself?"

Boiled glanced at Flesh, unspeaking.

"We ran some background checks on you ourselves, you know. You're amazing. All those cases you solved with that other PI called Oeufcoque, and every single one of them designated an

Official License. You're a real celebrity within the industry, aren't you? And I hear you've got a lot of clout with the DA's office too."

"That's all stuff that my former partner engineered after he dissolved our partnership."

"Hmm…I would have thought you were the sort of person who didn't worry too much about history, what someone might or might not have done. I was hoping you wouldn't mind discussing the past?" Flesh asked.

Boiled continued staring at the monitor, but nodded slightly.

"We were all in the Forces. Well, Medi and I were all in the Experimental Mechanized Division of the Marine Corps—the Guinea Pigs, we were known as—and we met Rare and Mincemeat at the front when we were all thrown together in the same company of the Southern Division on the Continent. I was up for military discharge after getting shell-shocked and developing paranoia, but then loads of enemies came and surrounded us. We had to hole up in the forest for over ninety days before the helicopters were finally dispatched to evacuate us. Even today, whenever I see an oak tree it takes me back, brings back vivid memories."

Boiled ignored Flesh, but he carried on speaking. "Everyone looked after me, a mere comm specialist. A lot of soldiers ended up regressing to a childlike state, though. Some grew paranoid, or started developing abnormally aggressive tendencies. Some units had a lot of these sorts of soldiers concentrated in one place, and I somehow found myself in one of them. At first we were the exception, but before we knew it our sort of unit became quite common, especially on the front lines. Then, as the battle intensified, it became completely normal. These are the only sorts of people who can really adapt to the front lines, after all. We fought hard and received plenty of medals. We killed a lot of people. A lot of enemies, a lot of allies. Guns, gas, bombs, electricity—we used all sorts of weapons. All day long I survived on tranquilizers washed down with scotch, firing away from inside my armored vehicle. Eating and shitting where I sat firing my guns. In a vehicle not unlike this one, actually, for three months, with no sunlight, in a place like a subway toilet. As a result of that I started suffering from white wax disease in my legs…"

Flesh stopped talking at this point and smiled at Boiled. "And what about you, sir? Have you been involved in experimental warfare?"

"I was in the P7 Experimental Corps."

"P7…oh, so an Airborne Division? I know about all of them up to P6, in charge of the twenty-to sixty-thousand-meter altitude zones, right? I didn't realize there was anything higher than that."

"Strategic Space Corps. There were three of us, including me, who enlisted—volunteers from the Airborne Division."

Flesh clapped his pudgy hands together. "Amazing! Just like a sci-fi movie!"

Boiled's eyes caught Flesh's again. After a second he nodded silently, facial expression immutable as ever. A movement like the cylinder of a revolver spinning in place.

Then a murmur. "The whole unit was a sham, a concoction. Objectives and results, all fabricated. It was only there as a smokescreen to develop pointless technology."

And with that, he turned his eyes—devoid of sentiment as ever—back to the monitor.

Chapter 4

SPARK

01

It was four in the afternoon.

Balot was stirring stew in a saucepan, but she suddenly stopped. Oeufcoque was standing on the counter sniffing the air coming in through the ventilation system. Balot poked Oeufcoque with her free hand.

"Agh, that tickles." Oeufcoque covered his sides.

But his nose was still to the ventilator.

He spoke with just a trace of nerves. "There's an unusual smell."

Balot poked at the stew. She lifted up the wine, bringing the neck of the bottle toward her.

"I'm not talking about the seasoning."

Balot placed the bottle down and leaned her head toward him.

"There's a smell of *carnival*. A group of people rejoicing, about to go to a party, or a festival…or maybe to war." Oeufcoque spoke and sniffed the air again. "There's also the faint, bitter smell of fear. As if someone has been killed."

Oeufcoque looked at Balot, apprehensive. But Balot was no longer afraid of this sort of thing. She turned the heat down and entwined Oeufcoque around her fingers.

–Enemies?

"Probably. Check communication lines with the outside world, will you?"

Balot put Oeufcoque on top of her right hand and touched the intercom on the wall with her left hand as he'd requested.

She *snarced* the receiver without lifting it, putting a call out to the police escort that was staked out in the neighborhood.

–The lines are all ringing, but nobody's answering.

"What, all three of the bases? What about headquarters? And try the Doctor too."

–I'm not getting anything.

Balot tapped the receiver with her fingers.

–Something doesn't feel right. It's coming up that the lines are engaged, but it's weird. It feels like I'm contacting somewhere entirely different.

A claustrophobic, urgent atmosphere pressed in on them from all sides.

Balot took her hand off the intercom and turned the stove off completely, and then she took her apron off and threw it over a chair. She headed toward her room, Oeufcoque still on her hand.

–They're coming, aren't they? The people who rubbed out our police guard. Coming here to assassinate us too.

"Highly probable."

–I want to get ready. Will you give me five minutes? "What are you planning to do?"

–Take a shower.

She spoke as if she were talking about tending to her firearms.

Oeufcoque nodded. "But be quick."

*Dish, wash, brush…*she felt the ditty spinning around the back of her mind as she savored the hot water. *Dash, crush, rush, flush…*

She knew that having dirt and grime on her skin weakened her natural abilities. So, whenever

she was due to wear Oeufcoque she needed to make doubly sure she was clean. To scrub herself up spick and span, polish herself up like a stainless steel knife.

As she washed she started to feel that she might be able to grasp each individual droplet of hot water as it fell from above, down to the finest of movements. She probably could have. Even the destination of the water. She could almost imagine the whole world flowing through her skin.

Under her control.

My body is my own.

The seed of resolve was planted firmly in the back of her mind.

She wasn't going to hand it over to anyone else ever again.

She would protect it—and fight.

Why me? The eternal question was about to deliver up an answer that she had never even dreamed of. Or not an answer, to be precise, but a reversal*, turning* the question inside out, just like Oeufcoque.

Whoever it is who's targeting me—I'll make sure they get their just rewards.

That was the answer she had to the question of why everything had to happen to her; she would take the question—*Why me?*—and shove it right back in her enemies' faces.

Dish, wash, crush, mash…

She turned the shower off. She *snarced* the TowelJet without touching it, and strong warm gusts of air blew from all directions, drying her body.

She rubbed oil on herself, luxuriating under the warm breeze.

She was now the perfect blade, or so she felt. A blade so sharp it would even cut through its own sheath. She was a sharp sword who had the right to *choose* what she would have wrapped around her.

And, of course, she had already chosen. Her one and only scabbard—and weapon.

Goodish, fresh, wish…

Balot left the bathroom. She stood in front of the desk, not a stitch on her body.

She reached out her hand toward the mouse that was standing on the desk and sniffing his surroundings with a pointy nose.

Oeufcoque jumped onto her hand. "Good to go?"

Balot nodded, wrapped Oeufcoque around her fingers.

–All set.

She imagined a dress, an impregnable iron fortress that would wrap her up completely.

Working with this vague image, she *snarced* Oeufcoque, running through his various programs and adapting them one by one.

–Hug my body. Tight.

Oeufcoque *turned* with a squish.

Into the dress chosen—*singled out*—by his one and only.

The night melted like chocolate and seeped into the town.

The Bandersnatch Gang moved as one. Rapidly, silently, they closed in on the former morgue from three different directions.

Welldone led the way, and Medium followed swiftly behind.

Welldone checked the surroundings while Medium stuck his Lockbuster Card into the rear

door.

"It's open. It was a triple lock—we only just made it." Medium spoke and quickly slipped inside. Welldone followed immediately after, almost back-to-back with Medium, and closed the door carefully behind them.

The corridors were dark and narrow. Medium proceeded down them with caution, and Welldone indicated to him to speak through their transplanted communication devices.

–We'll leave the Lockbuster in and use it to carry our hack of the circuits. How long till we can take over the building's security systems, Fleshie?

–Two minutes should be plenty, Well.

–Rare, you enter from the south the moment we've overridden their security. Medium, you enter from the main entrance, carrying the Boston bag full of firearms. No transmissions from more than three meters away until we're sure their security system is completely down.

–There are your orders, guys. I've pinned down the location of everything in the building. Heat sources detected in the kitchen on the first floor and the north-facing bathroom.

–Go and investigate, Medi. See that the target doesn't escape through a window. I'm heading to the basement.

Without looking back Medium raised his right hand to acknowledge, then glided down the corridor, footfall silent, disappearing around the right turn.

He removed his gun from its holster on his hip, and his eyes flashed red behind his sunglasses. His computer-enhanced eyes picked up all the obstacles in the dark, clearly and accurately.

–Building secured. Sending through floor plans of the whole building now.

Flesh's voice echoed deep in his ear.

Medium's eye flashed. A semi-transparent diagram appeared directly over his retina. There were little markers to show where he and the other members of his gang were, and the rooms where their target was likely to be were highlighted in red.

–Move in, Rare. Mincemeat, standby on alert five meters from the entrance hall. Flesh was giving the instructions now.

"Here we go!" Medium used his real voice, not the wireless. A smirk formed on his face.

He pushed on, cross-checking the data on the map in his retina with what he could see, and decided on his best route.

If he'd wanted to he could have brought up an image of the field of vision of the other gang members, but Medium stayed fixed on the floor plans as he advanced down the corridor. It was a long corridor. *Some sort of special setup*, thought Medium. *This is massive. Why would you need a bathroom that's more than twenty square meters in size? Must be to clean all those dead bodies.* There was almost no light now, and he passed by a number of doors but barely paid them any notice. He'd already checked in his retina that the target wasn't behind them.

And this was why he completely failed to notice the white shadow that emerged from one of the rooms and started to tail him, following in his footsteps almost casually.

Medium turned a corner in the corridor and before he knew it he appeared to be inside a small closet.

Medium froze to the spot. Darkness enveloped him and seemed to stretch out forever.

–Fleshie? What the hell is going on? Where am I?

–Calm down. Calm down. There's a door right in front of you.

–Door? I don't see any…

But then Medium realized that he was indeed staring at a single door right in front of him.

–Found it. A door. What's on the other side?

–Someone's waiting for you.

–Waiting?

–Someone's holding a gun and waiting for you.

Medium smirked.

–Okay, Fleshie. Let's work out if it's our target or the PI. Give me their exact location and physical characteristics.

An image flashed up in Medium's eyes—an orange silhouette of the figure beyond the door.

–Wow, a giant. At least two meters tall. Must be the PI, right?

–That's right. And if you shoot, you'll hit him for sure.

Medium aimed his gun carefully at his enemy beyond the door.

–Let's see who's the faster shot, tough guy.

He fired.

All fourteen shots in three seconds flat. He swapped magazines immediately, then kicked down the door that was now riddled with bullet holes.

Something came hurtling toward him, enveloping him.

–What the…

Cold water.

Medium scrambled to ready his gun, no idea what was going on.

Something slammed into his shoulders and body, forcing him over in a backward somersault.

He thought for a moment that he had been hit by some explosives that the enemy had planted.

But, as it transpired, he was wrong.

His eyesight returned to him and cut through the haze, and he saw it was something entirely different that floated to the surface. A large white mass.

Medium's gun shot up, a reflex action.

It was a bundle of wet toilet paper.

Soaked through now, Medium took his sunglasses off and opened his eyes wide.

He was in a toilet stall.

This was the place that he had kicked the door down to and rushed in.

The toilet was in smithereens, obliterated by the electric charges fired at it, and it was vigorously spewing out water.

"What…what the hell *is* all this?" He spoke out loud again, unthinking.

He left the cubicle. On the wall to the right of him he saw four urinals. On the opposite wall, mirrors and sinks.

The giant expanse of space he'd been in had disappeared without a trace.

Medium turned back to look at the stall again.

It was the only stall in the bathroom, and his eyes went to something on the wall above the destroyed toilet.

Written on the tiles, in a bright poppy-red color:

I'M GONNA TO SNARC YOU UP!

–Fleshie, what the hell am I looking at…

–I'm coming…

–What?

–Let's see who's the faster shot, tough guy.

The bathroom door opened.

All Medium could do was stand and stare.

A girl stood before him, dressed in brilliant white.

Pure as snow, from tip to toe.

Her clothes had a bondage-gear feel to them, as if she were wrapped up in white restraints. Or it could have been an evening dress, or a wedding dress.

One thing he was sure about—the striking figure in front of him was unmistakably the Teen Harlot he had seen in the video.

Rune-Balot.

An unusual name…

He wondered whether it was the PI in charge of her case that was responsible for her extraordinary appearance.

"Drop your weapons." A man's voice, out of nowhere. Surprised, Medium raised his gun. Had the voice emerged from this defenseless girl standing right in front of him?

Balot's left hand rose, and the snow-white silken glove *turned* with a squish into something else.

A gun.

Light glinted off its silver barrel.

Medium gulped. His finger pulled the trigger on his gun almost reflexively.

A tremendous spark flared between Balot and Medium, lighting up the room.

Medium's eyes were now wide enough to split his eyelids apart. He realized with horror what was happening:

The girl in front of him had actually shot at, and hit, his bullet.

Howling like a dog, he fired again.

Sparks. Explosion.

Steel shrapnel splattered against the walls, spilled to the floor.

But this time that wasn't all. Medium felt a searing pain in his shooting hand. All four fingers, his thumb, and the grip of the gun had all been pierced by shrapnel.

The very definition of perfect marksmanship.

"Uh…" Medium's face went white.

His left hand disintegrated and fell to the floor along with his destroyed gun. The water continued to gush out of the ground behind him, covering the tiles.

Medium tried to jump out of the way, but Balot shot at the gun on the floor. At the grip, the magazine that he had crammed full of electronically charged bullets.

All the bullets exploded at once, and a blue-white flame enveloped Medium from the feet upward.

He had no voice left in him, and instead of screaming he danced a bizarre dance in the flashing light. His whole body stiffened and burst at the seams.

The air was pregnant with the stink of burnt flesh and hair.

The blue-white light traveled across the water-covered tiles and struck Balot's body too, but was repelled by the white raiment that bound her body tight, fizzling away harmlessly.

Thunk—Medium collapsed in a heap. Sparks continued to leap from the side of his head. The various electronic devices implanted in his head had short-circuited, and now pitch-black blood was pouring from his eyes and ears.

He wasn't quite dead yet—but he'd seen better days.

Balot looked at the geyser of water that was jetting out from where the toilet had been. She intercepted the building's water supply system—and *snarced* it. The flow of water slowed, then stopped.

She approached Medium and, with the lightest of touches, put her hand on Medium's forehead.

She sensed a weak current and recognized it as a voice being transmitted directly into his head.

–What's the matter, Medi? Are our transmissions not getting through? Was the target there? We're not getting any response from Medi, Well. Medi, If you can hear…

–I'm fine.

Balot answered, in Medium's voice.

–There's nothing here. No sign of our target. I'll continue searching.

Then she stopped *snarcing* the transmission, left the men's toilets, and closed the door behind her.

–No, it's definitely weird. It doesn't add up.

Mincemeat heard Flesh's voice at the back of his mind.

"Wassup, Fleshie? Explain to me what's so weird." Mincemeat held his Boston bag under one arm, waiting leisurely just outside the entrance hall.

–According to Medi's audio records, he's just heard a number of gunshots. One of them doesn't show up anywhere on my database—my *database. So we must be talking about some pretty unusual equipment.*

"So there's someone with different equipment from us. One of the PIs?"

–Yes, but Medi seems to be saying he's all right…

"Hmm…"

–You're the closest one there to Medi, Mincemeat.

"Fine, I'll check it out." Mincemeat gripped his Boston bag and headed straight for the entrance. "If the target runs from the building you'll have to get Rare or Well to catch her, 'cause I'm heading in to see if there are any enemies closing in on Medi. Open the door for me, will ya?"

–Sure.

Mincemeat gave the lobby door a gentle shove and it swung open without resistance.

He walked straight on into the hall.

Checking that there was no one behind the window at the reception area, he shoved his hand into the Boston bag. He pulled out the reserve firearms—in the shape of an attaché case—and walked down the corridor in large strides.

He shed his Boston bag and pushed on farther down the corridor, where he heard an elevator door chime and open.

He slipped deftly behind a pillar and silently opened the lock on the case in his hands.

The box folded out in both directions, and a double-handed grip appeared in the middle, which he held firmly. There were muzzles where the box folded out, pointing outward—this was a fearsome automatic weapon.

After taking note of his surroundings, he opened transmission channels.

–Is this elevator your work, Fleshie?

–That's right.

–You want me to get in it?

–That's right.

–I thought Medi was on the first floor, though? Do you think he's found the enemy?

–That's right.

–Send me the floor plans, will ya? Right, so that's where Medi is. I'm moving on out.

–That's right.

–Huh?

The transmission ended abruptly. But the floor plan showed clearly the route he needed to take.

Mincemeat shrugged his shoulders. "Jeez, talk about impatient."

Paying close attention to his surroundings, Mincemeat slipped into the elevator.

He looked at the operating panel inside. There were five buttons, one for each floor from the

basement to the roof. The button for the second floor was already flashing yellow.

The elevators closed, and Mincemeat braced his large body as best he could.

The pressure pulled him down. The lift was rising now with ferocious speed. Mincemeat just about managed to stop himself from buckling over.

The violent screeching of the wires could be heard overhead.

Then the elevator shuddered to a sudden halt, throwing Mincemeat's huge frame into the air for a second before he crashed back down onto the elevator floor, slamming his knee against the steel.

Mincemeat's face was twisted in fury.

–Flesh, you little shit! This isn't a fucking carnival ride!

–That's right.

–Huh? That's all you've been saying since…

A cold sweat broke out on Mincemeat's brown skin and his lips trembled as he heard:

–THAT…IS…RIGHT.

An unfamiliar voice, straight in his ear—inside his own head.

"Who the hell are you?" Mincemeat couldn't stop himself from yelling out.

The elevator immediately resumed its ascent, throwing Mincemeat to the floor again. It stopped suddenly on the third floor before plunging straight back down again.

"You shithead!" he roared. He pointed the firearms in his hands at the panel on the door and shot it to pieces with both guns.

The elevator stopped.

A smile returned to Mincemeat's perspiration-bathed face. "I used to be a pilot, you know. That was nothing…"

The lights went out, but that didn't worry him. A *click* at the back of his eyes and his pupils shone red.

Dark, light…it was all the same to him. He rechecked the floor plans showing in his retina.

The bottom third of the elevator door had gotten as far as the second floor. With his two-hundred-thousand-dollar butter knife in his left hand, he burnt off the rest of the panel and pulled out the wiring. He pointed his other hand, firearm and all, at the door.

His eyes skipped over the wires until he found the one that opened the elevator door.

Just then, a *fizz*, and something sprang up under his feet. An unbearable heat ran through his body. He jumped with a shriek.

Something else leapt up from straight below him, piercing straight through his firing arm.

He rolled up his sleeve to take a look.

There was clean, round hole right between a pair of eyes on his arm. The eyelids were open wide, as if the transplanted eyes were surprised.

Mincemeat broke out in a cold sweat.

It was one damn thing after another.

The shot that came from below had hit the thumb on his shooting hand.

A series of screams emerged from Mincemeat's mouth as he was shot again, in his hands, legs, and buttocks.

Mincemeat danced his bizarre dance to an audience of no one, yelling inside the box, where no one could see. When he dropped his knife, that too was shot to pieces. An intense surge of sparks erupted forth, scorching his right leg.

He found a moment to squeeze the grip of the gun with his right hand. He pointed the gun

straight downward.

At the same time, a 10mm bullet came flying into his left eye. His mechanical eye was crushed right in the socket. Sparks and blood spurted out, littering the floor.

"I'm going to rape the shit out of you for this, you fucking bitch!"

Mincemeat fired dozens of shots at the floor, turning it into mincemeat, living up to his nickname.

Plenty of steaming holes were open in the floor now, and he peered through them, but saw no one. He turned to the elevator door, shooting it up just as he had the floor. When the bullets in the top half of his gun case were spent, he flipped it up into the air and gripped it the other way around.

He pulverized the door, leaving it a bullet-riddled mess.

"I'm going to kill you!"

He charged the door with his shoulder, and it bent open. He pushed it open with his left hand—now minus a thumb—and tumbled into the corridor, out of breath.

Blood and sweat trickled down him in equal measure—his whole body was drenched.

He crept down the corridor, crawling, and hid in the shadow of a pillar.

–Fleshie! Answer me, you bastard! Well! Flesh has been hacked! Well! Medi! Rare! Shit, answer me, someone!

But the only answer he had was wild laughter from an unknown voice, echoing all around.

Confused, Mincemeat scanned the corridor to the left and to the right.

No one.

The laughter was happening inside Mincemeat's head.

He tried to cut the circuits but found he couldn't.

Tears welled up in his one remaining good eye.

Regression disorder, someone had called it.

The sounds of battle brought all the bad memories back to him in a haze of black smoke.

His helicopter had been shot down, and two days later he was taken captive. It was on the day of his release, a year later, that he thought up his plan to transplant his wife's eyes into his arm. His ex-wife, actually—she had served him with divorce papers earlier in the year, when he was already at the limit of human endurance, suffering all sorts of ill-treatment as a prisoner of war.

And his ex-wife had been giving him a look of the sincerest contrition every day—from his right bicep.

Mincemeat tugged at his hair and ripped off his blood-soaked clothes, revealing all the eyes transplanted onto his upper body.

He screamed a wordless scream as he forced himself up.

Brandishing his gun he pulled himself down the corridor, dragging his legs behind him.

The laughter in his head continued loud and shrill, driving him to distraction.

A pair of shutters slammed shut right in front of him—and behind him.

They were fireproof shutters—and odor-proof, made with the building's particular requirements in mind.

Mincemeat realized that he was once again trapped in a small space, cornered on all four sides.

"I'm gonna fuck you up good and proper, you little bitch! I'll rip your eyeballs out and skull-fuck your eye sockets!"

He was firing indiscriminately now, shooting everything he had in all four directions. Empty cartridges flew in all directions, and the walls were remodeled under the barrage of bullets.

Just then he felt heat behind him. Mincemeat turned around.

The shutters were right in front of his eyes.

And from beyond the shutters, more bullets came flying.

Both his knees were shot to pieces at almost exactly the same time, and he fell onto them, gritting his teeth in agony.

As he collapsed both his elbows were blown off. His front arms drooped down, useless.

Every single blow was accurate to the extreme.

And in the twinkling of an eye—literally. For each of the eighteen pairs of eyes implanted into his body were being targeted, methodically, ruthlessly. The liquid from the eyeballs was splashed around the room, and the crystalline lenses of the eyes, intermingled with blood and tears, seeped across his body in a thick soup.

Screams of despair filled the airtight chamber.

Still Mincemeat managed to stand, and even as blood and vitreous humor poured from his body, he managed to find the strength to charge the shutters like a frenzied bull.

With a violent crash the shutters buckled under the impact of Mincemeat's shoulders. Blood splattered the duralumin surface, and as he peeled his hands off it a string of liquid lingered behind.

He charged the shutter again.

The gunfire had already stopped, but he was no longer interested in that.

Then, without warning, the shutters opened, retracting into the ceiling.

Mincemeat became vaguely aware of a small, shadowy figure.

Gathering the last of his strength he screamed and charged at the silhouette.

He became aware that the figure had multicolored hair dangling down over a pair of sunglasses.

By the time Mincemeat realized that he knew the face under the hair, the figure's butter knife was already embedded deep in his heart.

≡

Rare was overcome with shock, but he managed to wriggle himself out from under Mincemeat's dead body, which had collapsed on top of him.

He looked at his own knife, then screamed into the transmission device in the piercing voice of a little girl.

–What's going on? I thought you'd managed to trap the PI in there? Why is it little Minty? Do you want me to come over there and kick the shit out of you? What were you thinking, Flesh, you stupid fuckwit!

–Oh, don't you worry your pretty little head about it.

–What?

–That is *the PI, right there.*

Rare's pale face darkened as the blood rose to his head.

–You fucking hacker! I'll tie you down and have you gang-raped by pigs, you piece of shit!

Rare ranted on in this vein for a short while before bursting into tears of anguish and pulling the Hutchinson Knife from Mincemeat's chest.

"Oh, you poor, poor thing, little Minty, all because that fuckwit Flesh didn't notice that we'd been hacked…you poor, poor little darling."

Suddenly there was a *click* in his ear, and a transmission began.

–Come in, Rare.

–Is that Well? The real one? Not the piece-of-shit hacker?

–Yeah, it's me. Flesh is doing all he can to restore our secure line. What's the situation over there?

–Little Minty…

–They got him?

Rare howled an unearthly wail as an answer.

–…I see. According to Medi, the target has run down to the basement along with the PI. They're protected by thick shutters—Flesh is trying to find a way to open them. You head downstairs and meet us.

–Okay, Boss. Are we going to sell little Minty's body off for parts too?

–No, we're a band of brothers. We don't sell our family members off. Those of us who want to use Mincemeat's parts have the right of first refusal. Right?

–Of course. That's right, Boss.

Rare gripped his knife tightly and meandered down the corridor.

–I'll see you downstairs in the basement, Boss. Could you beam me through the floor plans, please?

Rare's eyes glinted red. Tears fell, blood-red under the reflection of the colored light.

He followed the route toward the basement, wobbling from side to side, all the strength drained from his arms.

–Head into the room to your left, Rare. There's a shortcut.

Rare did as Welldone said, opening the door on the left-hand side. He descended the stairs and entered the room.

–Lock the door behind you.

Rare was about to do so, then came to with a jolt.

"What did you say?"

Rare looked around, grinding his teeth.

A large number of lockers lined the wall. Evidently some sort of storage room for corpses—and no sign of anything that could resemble a shortcut.

Gripping the hilt of his knife even tighter, Rare glared at his new surroundings.

The electronic lock on the door behind him shut automatically.

Rare snapped back to look at what had happened, and he saw a ridiculously long release code flash up on the display of the electronic lock.

He tried the numbers several times, but there was no trace of a response. He kicked the door with a high-pitched whine.

"How dare you, you piece of shit! Where the hell am I? Flesh! Flesh!" He carried on kicking at the door, apparently not even noticing that he was now yelling out loud.

–You're in the Archaeozoic Era.

Well's voice—no, a voice identical to Well's—from deep inside his own ear.

–And now you're in the Proterozoic Era. And now Paleozoic, Cambrian, Mesozoan, and finally the Diluvial Epoch.

Rare spun around in surprise.

–You're in a sea of fossils.

Countless numbers of spirals flashed before his eyes.

Ancient shells that had become one with stone were now appearing here and there and everywhere—all around the mortuary, buried in the lockers—giving the distinct impression that they were in some sort of prehistoric deep sea graveyard.

Rare jumped into action, bringing the knife in his right hand down on the nearest wall.

The metal melted where the blade touched it, and part of the locker slid to the floor with a thud.

The spiral shells kept on appearing and disappearing as before. Proof that there was a projector somewhere, sending the images around the room.

"You and your fancy tricks! Come on out, you pig! I'm going to rip you to shreds and fuck the pieces!" Screaming, Rare raised his right hand, now balled into a fist.

The unusually thick bracelet that he wore on his left wrist started jangling. Without warning it fired strands of metal in every direction.

A crackling noise, and blue-white sparks followed.

Thin strands wound back into the bracelet, and the pieces of metal clinked and subsided.

In a few moments the lockers in Rare's vicinity had been reduced to pieces, collapsing into heaps on the floor.

"Wire whips." A voice from the shadows of the lockers. "Wires that emit charged particles. What a brutal weapon."

Rare turned toward the voice and without any hesitation pointed the bracelet in its exact direction and fired his weapon again.

A blue-white flash tore through the room, and with the sound of a dozen screaming whips, the fossils were ripped to shreds over and over.

For a second he saw a white figure caught in the wires, but it disappeared back into the darkness.

A hit, a palpable hit…

But Rare's facial expression tensed. The bracelet's rewinding function failed.

The display on the bracelet was going haywire, flashing randomly, and it wouldn't respond to Rare's instructions.

"Electromagnetic waves causing interference? Shit…" Rare tut-tutted, and was ready to throw the bracelet away as useless when, without warning, it started moving of its own accord.

"Remote control?" Rare stood there, astonished, and could only watch as the wires snaked across his left hand and wove an intricate path toward his body.

Rare shivered in terror, his face suddenly pale.

The very next moment the wires returned to the bracelet at breakneck speed, and Rare's left arm—from the elbow joint down—was diced like a steak, shredded into small pieces that dropped into a pile on the floor.

A scream—neither quite from a man or a little girl—gushed forth from Rare's mouth.

Rare tumbled into a heap, watching as the wires flew into the air once more before igniting in

a mass of sparks and disintegrating along with the bracelet.

Blood oozed slowly from the stump where Rare's arm used to be before its amputation.

"I'm going to kill you…" Rare's voice was full of venom but was masked by the sound of gunfire.

A bullet pierced Rare's shoulder with pinpoint accuracy.

Rare collapsed head over heels but used his remaining good hand to scramble for one of the pull-out lockers, using it as a makeshift shield.

Even as he did so another bullet pierced his left leg.

Giving a half-crazed yell, Rare still managed to move quickly and precisely, using the pull-out locker as a stepping-stone to get a better view of the figure hiding in the shadows, the figure that he had *almost* hit earlier. He leapt at it.

Bullets flew through the air, scoring direct hits on his right elbow and knee.

But Rare didn't stop. He descended on the figure, plunging his blade downward.

More sparks lit up the darkness.

The blade, blocked firmly by two guns being held in a crucifix shape.

Steel melted, and the sparks lit up the room, allowing Rare to finally see his tormentor's face.

"Looks like he has an artificially reinforced bone structure. The odd gunshot here and there isn't going to be enough to bring him down."

A voice. Oeufcoque's voice.

But the only person standing in front of Rare was that actress from the kiddie porn flick, all cherubic and innocent.

Pressing the gun barrels away with his knife as hard as he could, Rare gritted his teeth and squeezed out the name from the corner of his mouth. "Rune-Balot?"

At that very moment Balot relaxed and let go. She knew exactly what needed to be done to throw the enemy off his footing.

She let the crossed guns slip downward to the right, and Rare stumbled.

She would have shot him in the back as he fell, but she couldn't—the gun barrels were now half-fried.

Even as Rare collapsed to the ground he used his reinforced legs and loins to wrench his body around, facing Balot.

The tip of his knife sped toward Balot's flank.

More screeching and violent sparks.

Balot blocked the knife with her left-hand pistol. The incandescent blade ground into the body of the gun.

Rare stared at the girl, a confused expression on his face, as if to ask *What's going on?*

"Is she a PI who's had her features surgically altered to make her look like her client?" Rare voiced out loud, having decided that this was the only possible explanation.

Balot didn't answer—she just thought back to Oeufcoque's words, *let go* to *get go*.

She parried, sidestepping Rare like a toreador.

Rare's feet tripped over themselves, and his blade made a red-hot arc that rent the air.

But he'd be back up, thrusting the knife right at her again, in just a moment.

Balot *snarced* the guns in both her hands.

The guns melted, fused together, and *turned* into a Hutchinson Knife, the exact same model that Rare wielded.

Rare's expression was a sight to behold—but he didn't stop swinging his blade for a moment.

Balot switched the knife's powers on and used her knife to block Rare's blow.

The two highly magnetized blades collided, and an eruption of sparks burst in the space between Balot and Rare. Two bodies went flying.

Rare braced himself for his landing, gripping his knife the other way round now, while Balot consciously relaxed her muscles and flopped to the ground.

Rare brought his knife down on her, and Balot nimbly thrust her knife upward.

Incredibly, the two knifepoints met exactly, in an infinitesimally precise head-on collision.

The knife flew out of Rare's hands.

It twisted violently in midair before plunging into Rare's chest.

"Gah…" Rare moaned as he staggered backwards into the locker-lined wall.

The knife was buried deep in his chest.

Frantically he tried to gain purchase on the hilt to pull the blade out, but the impact of the electromagnetic current caused his fingers to flail uselessly.

He slid down the wall into a heap.

The stench of burning flesh emanated from his every orifice.

Balot grimaced at the vile smell. She almost vomited.

Before long Rare's mouth was gurgling, overflowing with blood. The fact that the blood wasn't evaporating was proof that his knife's electromagnetism had just about faded to nothing.

Rare was at death's door but still conscious.

"Including you there are four intruders total, right?" Oeufcoque asked, and Rare looked at Balot with an expression somewhere between rage and tears.

Then his jaw twisted in a strange way. He opened and closed his mouth, and a reedy voice just managed to escape. "I'll have you gang-raped by pigs…princess…"

A gruesome sneer descended over Rare's pallid features and Oeufcoque cried out, urgently, "The smell of death! Balot, retreat!"

Balot understood immediately. Telecommunication equipment and reinforced sinews weren't the only things implanted inside Rare's body. She leapt away from him, *snarcing* Oeufcoque to cover her whole body. Oeufcoque responded as rapidly as he could.

Light filled the room.

There was a thunderous roar and a blast of pressure.

For Balot this was the worst sort of scene imaginable—one that she had already experienced.

Rare's body exploded. The lockers were crushed flat, the ceiling warped, and the images of the fossils were wiped clean by the blazing inferno that swept the room and the corridor outside, blackening all the walls.

A large elliptical object emerged from the rubble, bouncing with a *plop*, then rolling across the room. It looked almost like a giant white rubber ball.

A crack opened from the top, and from it emerged the figure of Balot, hugging her knees tightly to her chest. She jumped down to the ground.

The rubber ball-like object spat out a snow-white garment that started slithering back into place around Balot's body, hugging her tight, like leather bondage gear. Shock-absorbent material peeled off, sprinkling the floor like a cracked eggshell.

"Balot, are you all right?"

Balot surveyed her surroundings, scowling, staring at the still-flickering flames.

–I'm never having my body go up in flames again. I hate it.

Then she kissed her silk gloves, showing her gratitude to a shell of her very own.

–So, where's the last of our* prey? *The basement, they said?

"Don't refer to them that way—you're not supposed to be enjoying yourself. Are you?"

Balot laughed.

–I don't know if I am or if I'm not. All I know is that I'm doing just what you two taught me to do.

"But I…"

–And I want to get better. Like that guy just then. Close up.

"And the idea of hand-to-hand combat doesn't scare you?"

–Why should it? It's what I've got to do, right?

"Well, yes, but…"

–What a half-baked little thing you are, my soft-boiled Oeufcoque.

Balot impishly called out his name, a play on words, playing with him, and kissed her other hand.

–Don't you worry. Trust me. I'll pull it off, she informed him, matter-of-fact, smiling.

03

Welldone reached the bottom of the stairs and arrived at the basement in front of the door to the garage.

All of a sudden the whole building seemed to shake.

–What was that vibration?

Welldone raised his gun as he asked the question, but Flesh's reply was bemused.

–It doesn't make sense. The sensors just showed a heat reading large enough for an exploding bomb, but it came from a room that had absolutely no heat readings up till now. No one could have been in there. Maybe a trap that they set—something could have triggered it?

–But those vibrations tugged at my chest. Almost as if one of us had blown himself up.

Welldone was transmitting in a whisper now.

–Surely not, Well! After all, everyone's heading right your way just this moment!

–Everyone…?

–Medi, Rare, Mincemeat…

Flesh hesitated.

–But according to Rare's report, Mincemeat's gone down, right, Flesh?

–That's true…but all my circuits are secure now, so all our info should be completely safe from the hacker.

–The enemy could have extracted Mincemeat's transmitter from his head. The marker with Mincemeat's name—that's him.

–I guess so…

–Or possibly—the same thing could have happened to the others too…

–Huh?

–Will this damn door still not open, Flesh?

–Wait a second longer—I've just got the lock off. Boy, this is some security system. I don't get it; it must be so inconvenient to go through all this on a daily basis…

Welldone ignored Flesh's words and watched the barrier walls as they opened out to both sides.

As a wall, it really was quite something. According to their calculations it was up there with a full-on nuclear shelter in terms of strength and impact resistance.

Welldone passed through the door and stood in the parking lot.

It looked like a perfectly run-of-the-mill lot, with spaces for about ten cars, delineated by thick pillars and steel frames. There were two freight elevators lined up side by side, and one of these had its door left open.

There was a set of shutters down at the car park entrance, but nothing compared to the incredible gate he'd just come through.

The moment Welldone noticed the shutters at the end of the parking lot he stopped moving toward the meeting point and swung around, looking back at the entrance he'd come in through.

It was a completely ordinary door.

Just a normal automatic door, and it even had a transom on top—the shutters on your average twenty-four-hour convenience store were more solid.

–Our visual circuits have been hacked! Welldone yelled angrily at the back of his brain. He kicked the door in frustration. One side of the door bent with a loud *crack* and its hinges flew off, clattering down the corridor.

–It's just an ordinary automatic door! I was standing there with my dick in my hands, waiting in front of a door that I could have just pushed open! Flesh, give me a reading on the others' positions!

A click, and Welldone saw an image of three blue flashing lights converging on him.

–Flesh?

No answer.

Welldone grabbed a gun in each hand and bent down, pressing his back to the wall.

The flashing dot representing Rare was coming down the stairs behind him. The flashing dot representing Medium was in an elevator heading down to the lot. And the flashing dot representing Mincemeat came toward him from the emergency stairs on the other side of the parking lot, swaying from side to side as it descended.

"Specters, all of you…" Welldone muttered, a seething mass of indignation. "This is a disgrace! Rare! Medi! Answer me if you're there!"

Yelling now, he jumped up and ran toward the phantom figure coming down the stairs.

He lifted his guns and fired.

The bullets sped into the darkness, embedding themselves into the walls and dislodging some plaster.

At the bottom of the staircase he spun around, firing simultaneously at the elevator and emergency stairs.

The echo of the gunshots reverberated all around, and then the crisp sound of empty cartridges clinking to the ground.

His bullets were soon spent. He slammed his back to the wall, creeping along bit by bit, expelling the guns' magazines. He opened up his coat and, in a well-rehearsed move, shoved the bases of his guns toward the spare magazines that were clipped to his sides, pressing them into his body.

He pulled, and the magazines clicked off, making a noise like the pin on a hand grenade.

Each hand pressed a switch on the grip, the breechblock slid into place automatically, and the bullets were all ready to go.

"These babies have got your names on them! Show your asses!" he screamed, eyes scouring the darkness.

He was answered by an earsplitting noise.

The sound of a radio.

The car stereo from one of the vehicles in the corner of the parking lot blared loudly, headlights flashing. Its engine revved violently.

The blare from the radio turned into the furious drumbeat of electroclash.

The tires scorched the concrete, and the car charged toward Welldone.

Welldone jumped away from the wall.

The car plunged at him. The steering wheel spun around, cutting a tight turn, and the car bounded up and down, chasing him, suspension grating, headlights flashing ominously.

"Fuck you!" Welldone fired shot after shot. He jumped onto the oncoming car, an abnormally powerful jump, first onto the windshield and then onto the roof, shooting it to pieces before

tumbling off.

The car smashed into the wall, its front half now totaled.

Welldone picked himself up and trained his guns on the driver's seat.

But no one was inside.

Now a different car stereo came to life, headlights lighting up across the parking lot. Heavy metal this time.

The engine rumbled, and the gas-powered car started closing in.

At ridiculous speed.

Welldone spun around and fired at the driver's seat, but this car too had no driver.

He hid himself behind a pillar just in time. The car's right headlight smashed straight into the pillar, shattering—as if the car were trying to shave off a piece of the pillar as it pursued its prey.

Welldone took a running leap toward the next pillar, using it as a springboard to kick against and change direction.

The car plowed on into the pillar.

Concrete flew everywhere. The steel rebar reinforcing the pillar were now wrapped around the front of the car, merged into one mass.

The heavy metal stopped.

The drum and bass started.

Welldone landed on the ground and another car sped toward him.

Welldone screamed a wordless scream.

He jumped, firing at the driver's seat again, but even as he did so the car caught his right leg, smacking into him as it passed.

Welldone's body pirouetted through the air and slammed into the ground.

The advancing car continued on its course, slamming into the back of the car embedded in the concrete pillar.

Welldone pulled himself up and, with a dark expression, spat—saliva, blood, and smashed teeth.

He ejected his guns' magazines and reequipped them with a fluid movement and stared out into the darkness.

The second he clocked a white silhouette in the corner of his eye, he pointed the barrels of his guns straight at it.

He pulled the triggers, and returning fire came straight back at him.

An impact in his right knee. The same leg that had been hit by the car. Welldone's whole body jerked to the right and collapsed.

He rolled with the blow, firing off as many shots as he could as he fell.

None reached their target.

Another bullet came at him, hitting the same knee again.

His bulletproof padding shattered, and a hole opened up in his reinforced body.

A pitiful moan crept out of Welldone's mouth.

He reloaded his guns, bullets hurtling toward him as he did so, but none of the bullets hit him.

A suspicious expression appeared on Welldone's face.

He wasn't the target.

Welldone immediately realized what was going on. He gritted his teeth and sprang for cover on the other side of the pillar.

That instant the bullets pierced the gas tank and the car went up in flames, causing a chain explosion that brought the other car along for the ride.

A blast of flames engulfed Welldone, and his bulletproof coat was ripped to shreds as his body was flung against the wall—like a doll that a spoiled child had long since tired of.

Even then, Welldone wouldn't let go of the guns in his hands. He clambered to his feet, his whole body pierced with fragments of unidentified shrapnel.

Breathing hard, he glared at the blazing fire and readied his guns again.

Without warning another volley roared forth from the flames. They were aimed for the gaps in his now-ragged bulletproof coat.

His arms were hit, his shoulders were hit.

Desperately moving to change his position, he fired back, but the bullets just kept on coming.

A different type of bullet now, with an explosion of sparks on the surface of his bulletproof coat as it slammed into his body. Charged particles flowed across his skin, frying all his exposed flesh.

Next it was a rifle shot. It sliced through his left shoulder blade and made a hole in the wall behind him.

One by one, in quick succession, bullets of different calibers flew through his body.

Yelling what sounded like a war cry, Welldone peeled himself off the wall and charged at the whirlpool of fire.

On the other side of the dark red smoke Balot's face was a picture of delight as she fired her gun over and over.

"That's enough, Balot!"

An apparently inexhaustible supply of bullets emerged from a magical glove and disappeared again, like a sigh in a thunderstorm.

She wore a satisfied expression, reacting to every roar and explosion as if to say *That was me*.

She was *in control*—overwhelmingly so.

The power to manipulate objects—and sentient beings—as she liked, bending them to her will.

This is it, she thought. *This* is the feeling that the men in my life have always been *savoring*.

Where previously she had been brutally oppressed, now she was experiencing the ultimate high.

Overwhelmed by a gust of pleasure so intense that it almost felt like pain, Balot *grasped* this all too clearly.

"Stop it, Balot! That's enough!" Her ears registered Oeufcoque's shouts for the first time, even though he'd been yelling at her all the while.

She hadn't noticed because every time she had fired a shot, the shock wave of pleasure had numbed her senses.

Now her aim faltered. *What's the matter?* she wondered.

Oeufcoque was trembling. He was shot through with an emotion that Balot, in her current state, simply couldn't comprehend.

"Balot, I'm begging you, you can't *misappropriate* me so. It's…*abuse*. Keep to our original tactics, self-defense…"

–Don't you worry.

Balot stopped firing one of her guns for a second to give it a fleeting kiss.

–I'll be gentle with you. Leave it all to me.

Then she *snarced* her whole body with a sense of domination enough to make the blood turn sour.

"Stop i—"

This time she actually did block out Oeufcoque's voice, forcefully silencing him.

She *snarced* both guns, turning them into weapons she could use most easily.

Just then Welldone emerged from the smoke, both arms crossed in front of him to ward off the worst of the flames as he leapt through them.

He rolled over the rubble, clocked Balot's location, and stood up, his teeth bared. An expression somewhere between fury and a smile.

For a moment they stared at each other in absolute silence.

Then they pointed their guns at each other.

Balot started laughing.

04

"It's no good, I can't get through!" Flesh wailed in despair. He was inside the shipping container on the trailer.

"Well's response—it's as if he's brain dead! And there are sound prints of over ten different weapons recorded in his audio circuits…"

Boiled continued to stare at the monitor.

Flesh shouted. "How can there only be one of them? This is unbelievable? This PI Oeufcoque is a freak! A sadist! He's put Welldone in a coma and he's shooting up the carcass with a pile of weapons!"

Boiled suddenly interrupted Flesh's stream of words: "Fetishism is essentially compensation for a sense of helplessness."

Flesh stopped his wailing and stared at Boiled suspiciously.

Boiled spoke. "Those who fight in a way that's subconsciously designed to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy—Oeufcoque's skillful enough to trap them into his way of fighting. It's as I thought—Oeufcoque is providing tactical guidance, and the client doesn't really understand. This is a deviation from the designated Life Preservation Program—it's abuse."

"What are you talking about? I thought there was only one enemy?"

"The enemy is abusing Oeufcoque. Before long Oeufcoque will be forced to retreat from the battlefield in self-defense. The enemy will lose her ultimate weapon…"

Flesh's wobbly figure recoiled at Boiled's voice, sensing a dangerous undercurrent in his flat monotone.

"It seems that the target has been somehow reinforced with the Doctor's technological trickery. It seems that Paradise technology—*Scramble 09*—has brought another monster into this world."

"Paradise…what do you mean…"

But Boiled just took out a long gun from his breast pocket, and Flesh swallowed the rest of his words.

It was a giant silver revolver, and it looked strong enough to pierce the armor on a tank.

The sort of gun that only a being with extraordinary physical strength could wield properly.

Boiled opened the cylinder to confirm that it was fully loaded before snapping it shut again.

"A…are you going to go yourself, sir…?"

Boiled turned to look at Flesh and nodded.

"Then please be as quick as you can—I think Well's in serious trouble."

Boiled stood up and took the spare key to the trailer from off the wall where it was hanging.

Flesh watched him, wary.

"What are you going to do with this trailer?"

"Your gang has expended its *usefulness*. I wanted to gauge how Oeufcoque's new user would react when faced with danger. Now, before long, Oeufcoque and his user will be separated forever. I got what I came for."

He cocked the trigger of the gun, and it thudded into place with a heavy click.

He pointed the muzzle of the gun at Flesh, casually, almost off-hand.

Flesh trembled.

Boiled pulled the trigger.

The gun roared, and a hollow space appeared between Flesh's shoulders.

Behind him a gaping hole opened up in the wall of the container, exposing it to the elements. The whole trailer rocked from side to side, and the eye-watering smell of gunpowder filled the room.

Flesh's body slumped to the ground. He had been destroyed utterly from his chest upward, taking the machinery behind him along for the ride. His cloak had come open, and his fat wrists could just be seen peeping through from underneath the mass of exposed breasts.

Boiled reloaded the single empty chamber with another bullet and exited the container.

He walked around the front of the container, climbed up into the driver's seat, and inserted the key into the ignition.

"I'm coming. I'm going to acquire you, Oeufcoque. You're a tool, after all."

He twisted the key and the engine rumbled into action.

Boiled pressed down on the accelerator.

"Prepare to be fucked up, you bitch!" Welldone shouted. It sounded almost like an order.

Both of his hands pulled down on his triggers. Balot did the same, simultaneously. Shots flew in unceasing rapid succession. The bullets smashed into each other in midair, sometimes vaporizing each other, other times ricocheting all across the parking lot.

Teeth bared, Welldone moved in toward Balot as he fired. Balot stepped to her right. Welldone moved with her, mirroring her movements. The hail of bullets continued incessantly until one side stopped. Welldone's guns were both empty.

They both jumped behind pillars, but Welldone was the only one to reload.

As for Balot, as soon as she was in the shadows she *snarced* the guns in both her hands and fused them together.

The two guns melded together and *turned* into a single giant gun. Her gloves integrated perfectly into the grip, which formed the ideal shape for her hands: right hand to support and left hand to fire.

She burst from the shadows of the pillar, flanking Welldone and pointing the gun right at him.

Welldone screamed an inhuman cry. He had been trying to lift his right arm to fire, and now it was hit.

A shot to the back of his hand, a shot to the barrel, a shot to the firing hammer, and a shot to his elbow. A stream of bullets.

The ammunition—the magazine that he had just used to reload the gun—exploded in his grip. The gun was blown away, and with it all the fingers on his right hand.

Flying fragments splattered into the side of Welldone's face, painting it in shades of black and red.

Still Welldone thrust his left gun out, unloading half the bullets in the gun in an instant.

Balot didn't even try to dodge. She shot down only the bullets flying toward her face, trusting her perfectly white garment to deflect the rest.

Two blows to her chest, one to her hips. But the impact was almost completely absorbed, and the bullets didn't even reach her flesh.

This is all you are. This is the best you can do. She felt like shouting at him at the top of her

lungs. She wanted to break him completely, thoroughly abuse and disparage him. It was what she needed to do—and indeed she couldn't think of anything else she should be doing.

Balot walked straight up to Welldone and fired at him with all the rising passions in her body.

Not a single bullet missed.

She hit Welldone's legs, his shoulders, his stomach.

–No,* you *prepare to be fucked up!

Balot screamed in a non-voice.

–I'm gonna fuck* you *up!

Her thoughts flowed through Oeufcoque and were spat out the other end as bullets.

–Fuck you!

Welldone lay there, back to the pillar, arms and legs splayed open passively.

And when, in a last-ditch effort, he tried one final time to lift the gun that was still gripped in his left hand, Balot unloaded into his crotch, tearing it to shreds with another hail of bullets.

Frothing at the mouth, Welldone fired off a single shot in the wrong direction.

Gun smoke enshrouded the scene like tobacco smoke in a poolside bar that had no ventilator fan.

Empty cartridges from Balot's gun bounced out onto the floor rhythmically, as if they were playing a cheerful song.

Welldone slithered down the pillar, staining it red.

Balot continued to pump bullets into him even as he collapsed. With deadly accuracy she manipulated the bullets, manipulated Welldone, and manipulated Oeufcoque.

Drenched in sweat, she stayed her hand for a moment. The muscles in her wrists were throbbing, numb. The impact from firing the gun was now being absorbed by *her*, not her dress.

She realized that she could no longer hear Oeufcoque's voice, and that it was she herself who was suppressing it by force, as if she hadn't known what she had been doing.

Balot *let go* and released all the power that had been building up in her body.

Her eyes prickled with smoke and she couldn't see well.

She tried to *snarc* the lights and the air conditioning in the parking lot but realized that most of the circuits had stopped working.

Fires blazed all around.

Balot took a step back to survey a vista of rubble. The parking lot had been reduced to ruins; the ceiling had caved in where the pillars had been destroyed, and the contents of rooms on the first floor were strewn around the place.

The Doctor's research lab, too, thrown into the mix. All of a sudden Balot's eyes fell on an aquarium that she had seen before. At the back of her mind, Balot remembered the Doctor's words—that he was trying to find a way to regenerate her voice box.

The aquarium was obliterated, its burnt-out fragments intermingled with jagged shards of concrete.

The smoke cleared abruptly.

For almost the first time, Balot properly registered the appearance of her assailant.

His bullet-riddled body stirred.

The body that she had thought of only as a target—she had completely forgotten that he was a living, breathing thing.

The multitude of dark red wounds that punctured his body reminded her of this fact.

All of a sudden, an incredible, unbearable *nothingness* pressed in on her from behind.

Dreadful footsteps.

Sensing the air, *snarcing*—no use.

–Oeufcoque! Balot cried out to the gun. A heartfelt cry, different from any that had gone before.

–Oeufcoque, please answer me! Help me, Oeufcoque!

There was impatience in her plea now. Like she was trying to un-crush something that she had unthinkingly squeezed to pieces.

Balot called out Oeufcoque's name as if she were trying to piece back together a broken egg.

The gun in her hands warped into a crooked shape.

The gloves that had been melded together now split apart, and from that gap a bundle of fluffy honey-colored fur emerged.

–Oeufcoque.

Gwah…a slight moan. Oeufcoque's limbs twitched, convulsing, and he writhed in Balot's palms in agony.

Like the man he had just shot.

Without warning, Oeufcoque was violently sick.

A large volume of vomit spewed from his mouth, more than seemed possible from his tiny body, and dripped through Balot's gloved fingers.

–Oeufcoque? Oeufcoque? What's the matter?

Balot's eyes filled with tears.

Oeufcoque vomited again.

He spoke in a raspy voice, as if he were wringing something out of his body in between his heavy breathing. "Let go of me."

Balot didn't understand what he meant by those words. Rather, she tried to hug him tighter to her than ever.

As she did so, Oeufcoque twisted his head around to try and shake her off. "Please don't touch me…I'm begging you. Let me down, please…"

Gwah…he was sick again.

Balot stood there like an idiot. She didn't know what she was supposed to do—and Oeufcoque, the very person who was supposed to *tell* her, was frantically trying to escape from her hands.

Desperate now, she tried to pin Oeufcoque down, tried to stop his limbs from writhing around.

"Stop it! Leave me alone!"

Balot shook her head, determined. Her eyes were soon overflowing with tears.

She desperately searched for an escape route from the horrible feeling that overwhelmed her, the feeling of being plunged into a pit of darkness, and Oeufcoque was the only person she could think of that could save her.

Oeufcoque vomited still more copiously, then collapsed limp and senseless.

Balot stood there silently, waiting for Oeufcoque to speak.

She was more scared than she had ever been. She felt like she had been turned down, with stinging words of rejection thrown into her face.

Tears flowed, but all she could do was wait.

But when he did finally speak, it was to tell her something completely different.

"He's coming…" Oeufcoque spoke in the reediest of voices. "Go to the roof. The Doctor will…quickly."

Confused, Balot tried to work out what he meant. And also how she could best apologize to Oeufcoque. Her thoughts flew from one place to another.

Then she noticed the presence of something coming toward her—something large.

She raised her head. Her tears had stopped.

An incredible mass of *something* was charging toward the shutters at the other end of the car park.

A threat.

Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque as a reflex action.

Oeufcoque let out a cry of pure anguish.

A loud crunching noise silenced his cry.

The shutters exploded open, and a giant trailer rushed into the parking lot. It smashed through a number of pillars, a wake of sparks behind it, zigzagging across the space and scraping up against the walls, before finally running aground on the rubble.

The coupling connecting the vehicle to the container split, and the giant container was thrown toward the pillar where Welldone lay prostrate.

Sandwiched between the concrete and the giant silver container, Welldone's body burst like a balloon.

Balot stared at the monstrosity that had just emerged from the blazing inferno, still holding Oeufcoque, her back to the wall.

The air was fizzing with tension.

She could see a man getting up from the driver's seat.

She heard the door swing open, and a man came toward her, walking over the flame-flickering rubble.

"Run away…" A cracked voice emerged from Oeufcoque's lips.

But Balot stood still, staring at the overwhelming figure of the man. Not out of fear. Compared to what had just happened to Oeufcoque, she wasn't afraid in the slightest.

On the contrary, she felt excited—uplifted, even.

The flames from the fires lit up the man's features.

The blank features of the giant man.

The man who had threatened Balot on the roadside, at the courtroom.

His name was Dimsdale-Boiled, and he was stepping over the body of the man he had just crushed and coming right at her, an enemy and a true threat.

"She knows nothing about weapons, Oeufcoque. You shouldn't allow yourself to be used by such a person," Boiled said.

Oeufcoque pulled himself up in Balot's palm. "So, after sending your hit men you're going to interfere directly, are you? You're no different from these assassins yourself, Boiled. Forever absorbed in your own private vendetta."

"Come back to me, Oeufcoque. You deserve to be utilized more effectively," said Boiled.

Balot glared at Boiled.

Boiled wasn't even looking at Balot.

"*Effectively*, you say! Have you *forgotten* what you did with me?" Oeufcoque was shouting

now. A voice steeped in anger, one that Balot had never heard before.

"It's all the same, Oeufcoque. That little girl's hand, my hand—we're all looking for exactly the same thing." Boiled's eyes were so dark he could have been asleep.

Oeufcoque shouted, "No! This girl's different!"

Hearing his words Balot suddenly felt extremely sad.

Oeufcoque whispered to her. "You have to run away, Balot. In this sort of situation, discretion is the better part of valor…"

Balot stared straight ahead at Boiled.

–No. I'm going to stay and fight. I don't want to run away.

"It's no use, this guy is…"

–This person is a threat to me. I need to fight him.

Boiled slipped his hand inside his jacket.

"Boiled, wait…"

Balot reflexively wrapped Oeufcoque around her fingers and *snarced* him.

"Balot!"

–Please. Try and understand my feelings.

The man standing in front of Balot's eyes had once terrified her so completely that she had lost all hope of living.

Now, standing in front of this man—and despite Oeufcoque's words—she simply couldn't run away.

She knew that if she fled now, she'd never be able to stand up for herself again.

But that didn't necessarily mean that she had made the right decision.

Pinned down by the sheer force of Balot's will, Oeufcoque *turned*. At the same time Boiled pulled out his gun. A six-round revolver—and a palm-sized artillery gun.

It fired, savagely.

Balot fired into the round's trajectory.

There was a vibrant display in midair, and Balot's bullet disintegrated as it hit her opponent's, but her bullet did succeed in deflecting the shell's path.

An instant later the bullet slammed into the wall behind her, echoing oppressively through the parking lot. The bullet seemed powerful enough to cut straight through the wall.

Boiled fired again.

Balot saw the angle of the muzzle the second before the shot went off and jumped sideways to dodge the bullet.

A crevice opened in the wall behind her, and the air swirled around from the scorching trail of heat that the bullet left in its wake.

Balot fired back at him, frantically, as she ran.

Boiled didn't budge but fired again, unconcerned.

He was different from any opponent she'd faced before. Every single shot of his was careful, potentially instantly fatal. The pressure was tsunami.

One false move and every molecule of her could be wiped off the face of this earth.

In order to try and escape the unbearable oppression bearing down on her, Balot ran in the direction that made it hardest for her opponent to follow, and she fired back at him as she ran, desperately trying to distract him, but there was no change in Boiled's rhythm as he continued firing, apparently unconcerned by anything.

Something was wrong.

Carefully watching her opponent, Balot slipped behind a pillar. Another bullet came at her, slamming into the pillar with such impact that she had to suppress the reflex to jump and run screaming.

And that was when Boiled's gun ran out of bullets.

Balot leapt out from behind the pillar and fired as many shots as she could at him.

But Oeufcoque could no longer contain the shock from the recoil inside himself, and both Balot's hands throbbed in pain.

Boiled was coolly reloading his revolver, and he showed no inclination to move even as her volley flew at him.

Rather, it was her bullets that moved.

Their trajectories strayed, and they hit the rubble behind Boiled in a trail of sparks.

Overcome with surprise, Balot stopped firing.

Boiled looked at Balot's face. "So, no one told you anything about me?" He spoke, flicking his gun sideways. With a vigorous click the chamber slotted back into place in his revolver. "I'm a product of the forbidden arts, just like you—another monster." Boiled's expression was now twisted in a curious sneer. Like a smile that peered out at the world from the bottom of the abyss.

Cold sweat drenched Balot's body. Her knees trembled, and her gun shook.

Boiled's arm came up. The giant gun barrel was, once again, trained casually on Balot.

Her stomach lurched.

Before she even had time to think Balot found herself flying for cover behind another pillar.

The pillar was hit by a blow that shook it to the core.

Balot engaged her abilities. Her last chance, her last resort.

A car engine revved up in the corner of the parking lot.

Snarced by Balot, the car sped toward Boiled, tires screeching.

Even then, Boiled made no move.

For the first time ever, the fear of battle weighed heavily on Balot's shoulders. Still entrenched behind the pillar, gasping for air, she plunged the car toward Boiled with all her might.

Without warning Boiled disappeared abruptly from Balot's spatial perception.

The car sped over the rubble, flew through the air, and smashed into the side of the container.

Reflexively Balot emerged from behind the pillar to survey the results.

She felt Boiled's presence with every nerve ending in her body. She understood immediately what had happened. She just couldn't believe it.

Boiled was on the ceiling.

Balot looked up in astonishment, and Boiled was *standing* there, looking down at her.

Even the hem of his coat was upside down, fluttering gently in the breeze.

Silently Boiled started walking across the ceiling. Avoiding the pipes and electric cables. And pointing his gun at Balot.

"Run away…" Oeufcoque's distressed voice.

Snapping out of it, Balot twisted her body out of the way.

Or so she thought, but all of a sudden she felt an impact from behind. She was instantly winded.

Balot pitched forward, tumbling, and felt a bullet slam into her breastbone. The impact wasn't fully absorbed by her outfit, and she could feel and hear her bones creak under the pressure as her

internal organs were compacted.

Balot's body was flung into the air and only stopped when she collided with the wall a few meters away. A bucketful of saliva spilled from her lips, coating her thighs.

She had just barely managed to avoid dropping her gun.

Out of breath, she stood up, leaned her shoulders against the wall, and saw the figure of Boiled in the distance.

Boiled was stepping down from the ceiling and walking down a pillar. As if he were still walking on the ground. Then, right leg still on the pillar, he extended his other leg to the floor of the garage. Then he alighted onto the ground with both legs and stared at Balot in silence.

Fear drove Balot onward. She fired the gun in her hands over and over with reckless abandon.

Boiled didn't budge.

None of the bullets completed their course; they just flew off into the ground or the walls.

And then the gun stopped firing completely.

It was as if something were entwined around the trigger.

A creaking sound echoed inside the gun—inside Oeufcoque.

The trigger stopped moving at all, and Oeufcoque's groans could be heard from the gun in her hands.

"It seems the estrangement is now complete." Boiled's cold voice froze Balot to the spot. "A self-defense mechanism against those who abuse him as a tool. Oeufcoque has rejected you."

His words struck Balot like lightning.

The words were more painful to hear than any of the filthy insults she'd had hurled at her.

This was even more terrible, even more humiliating, and—worst of all—even further beyond the possibility of redemption.

Boiled raised his gun.

A voice came at her from beyond the darkness of the muzzle, from beyond the machinelike intent to kill—a voice that said *This is all your fault*.

Bad girl.

You're a bad girl.

Balot was overcome with despair and the fear of being sent back to that awful place.

You were trying too hard to climb the stairway to heaven, the Mardock*, that you slipped and lost your footing.*

This was her despair.

–I don't want to die.

She was crying.

She didn't want to die, not with her heart feeling like this.

Boiled's fingers moved mechanically, just about to pull back the trigger, when:

"You're wrong, Boiled…" Oeufcoque spoke.

Boiled's expression hardened.

At that very same moment, there was a series of clicks from inside Oeufcoque—inside the gun.

The sound of jammed cogs falling into place.

Boiled's eyes opened wide, and he pulled his trigger.

But an instant before the roaring noise emerged, Balot had reflexively—and correctly—*snarced* Oeufcoque.

The bullet that sped from Balot's gun intercepted Boiled's bullet perfectly, causing it to

ricochet into the ceiling. All the walls reverberated from the impact, and concrete fragments rained down.

Balot aimed at Boiled, ready to fire back, but—"Stop it. It's useless, Balot."

The gun fired of its own accord, unloading in a different direction, not giving Balot any say in the matter. All the bullets passed by Boiled harmlessly.

And that was exactly what the gun was aiming for.

The bullets pierced the gas tank of the car that had just smashed into the wall behind Boiled.

A moment later the gas tank swelled up—and exploded.

A blast of flame and metal shrapnel swallowed him.

Or so it seemed, but a bubble of clean air had emerged from inside the smoke.

Boiled emerged from it, apparently unscathed, standing still amid the melee of the firestorm, waiting silently.

Before long he noticed that no one was by the wall anymore.

While his attention was diverted by the blast, Balot had disappeared.

Boiled looked toward the elevators.

Seeing the display lights, he realized that one of the two elevators was heading upward.

"Why? Why do you allow your user to abuse you…" Boiled spoke in a low voice, directed at the flashing light.

"Oeufcoque."

As the elevator light stopped at the roof, Boiled headed straight for the emergency staircase.

His eyes glinted with an uncanny, otherworldly fury.

–I'm sorry, Oeufcoque, I'm sorry. Please don't go anywhere. Stay in my hands.

Oeufcoque's yelps of pain echoed around the cramped elevator box.

However much Oeufcoque might have been suffering previously, the pain was now even worse.

After saving Balot and showing her an escape route—this elevator—Oeufcoque had been overcome by a new wave of convulsions. His limbs were quivering worse than ever, and he was in a state of paroxysm, just as when he had tried to escape from Balot earlier.

He threw up again.

–I'm sorry, Oeufcoque, I'm so sorry.

Inside the lift Balot was folded into a fetal position.

She held Oeufcoque up as if he were broken, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

–Don't go anywhere, Oeufcoque. Don't leave me behind. I'm begging you. Please.

Now, finally, Balot understood Oeufcoque's feelings.

The dreadful thing that had happened.

She had promised to stop when he said *no*—and she had broken this promise in the worst way imaginable.

She never thought that she'd be capable of such a thing. *Why me?*

Or so she wanted to think.

She was the one who had always been betrayed.

She was the one who had always had to wonder *why* and worry about what exactly it was that she'd done wrong, turning it over in her mind in minute detail.

She had never imagined that the shoe could be on the other foot.

That *she* could be the one to break a promise, to make the other person suffer.

The very idea that she could hurt someone who trusted her—it had never even occurred to her.

"It's a type of self-defense mechanism, a bit like hyperacute rejection of transplanted organs. An automated response to when my *user* becomes my *abuser*…" Oeufcoque spoke between breaths as he lay prostrate. "It's due to my fear of being *disposed of*…but don't worry…I'll get over it soon."

The elevator suddenly stopped.

The doors creaked open and revealed a vast expanse of darkness.

From within the small box bathed in orange light, they could see the windswept concrete rooftop and the night vista of the city sprawling out below them in the distance.

Balot stared out at the view in silence, knees still to the ground.

She had no idea what she should do.

She had no idea what the right thing to do was.

She shouted in an empty whistle of a voice.

It sounded like a draft in a wind tunnel.

"…Sorry about all that. I'm better now," Oeufcoque said. He raised himself up gently and looked up at Balot.

Large tears still poured out of her eyes.

She wanted to say something.

She wanted to explain all her feelings to him.

But in her deep confusion she wasn't able to say anything, and the best she could do was try and stop her confusion from pouring out. She didn't want to hurt Oeufcoque anymore.

"Try and stand up. It's no use staying here. Let's get out of this box."

Balot took a deep breath. Nodding repeatedly, she stood up and stepped out of the elevator.

She wiped her tears away with one hand, carrying Oeufcoque along ever so carefully with her other.

There was nothing on the roof.

Nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide.

The cold night air only reinforced Balot's sense of isolation and helplessness.

"…We need to buy ourselves a little more time. See if you can close all the shutters in the emergency staircase and turn off the elevators."

Balot manipulated the building's security system, *snarcing* it as Oeufcoque had suggested.

But she was under no illusions that this would be enough to stop that man forever. No trap or obstacle was ever going to be able to do that.

"If it comes down to it he'll just walk up the building's walls. Keep a lookout for him."

–He was walking earlier. On the ceiling and the walls.

Just remembering that scene sent an involuntary shiver down her spine.

–What is he, exactly? My bullets had no effect on him either.

"*PGF—PseudoGravitational Float*, it's called—developed to give soldiers the power of independent movement in space," Oeufcoque explained. "Powerful magnetic field generators are implanted into your brain and limbs, allowing you to create an artificial gravitational pull in any direction you want. This omnidirectional gravity field allows you to walk along any surface you want—or to deflect the path of any bullets. The reason he can use that enormous revolver is also due to his *PGF*. Boiled was the prototype—or, you could say, the first victim—of the technology, just before *Scramble 09* was enacted."

Oeufcoque's eyes were downcast now, and he groaned. "I should have told you all of this before today…I really messed this one up."

–Why didn't you? Because you used to be friends?

"Whenever he decides to act, he gives off a characteristic odor. The cold, harsh smell of a mercenary going to war."

He raised his head and returned Balot's gaze.

"As long as I could avoid it, I didn't want to have to speak about him—or how his body worked—behind his back. In the same way that I wouldn't want to talk about your past or your body in front of other people."

Balot's eyes softened.

–You're so thoughtful.

That was all she said. That was all she could think to say. And then she thought of herself, and how she had forgotten about his thoughtfulness, and she was ready to start crying again.

But then she heard a gunshot down the stairs. The sound of shutters being ripped apart.

She hadn't bought herself much time.

–Where should I go? There's nowhere left!

Balot was at the edge of the roof now, hands on the iron railings that ran around the perimeter.

"The Doctor should be here. Close by. Can't you sense him?" Balot looked up at the night sky. The clouds drifted slowly, revealing the sharp crescent of the moon.

She sensed something from a distance that was gradually coming toward her.

"As soon as he received my emergency distress signal, the Doctor started heading back. He can't be more than a few minutes away."

Balot stared at the sky. She thought of an angel descending from the heavens. Just as she had fantasized whenever times were bad at the institute. The angelic visitor who would swoop down out of nowhere and rescue her.

As these memories came flooding back, she felt even more keenly the terrible things that she had done while using Oeufcoque.

Shameful, wretched things.

"Balot…" Oeufcoque called out nervously.

Balot spun around to face the emergency stairs.

The gunfire was getting closer now.

"Do it. Use me to protect yourself." Oeufcoque's little body trembled in Balot's hand.

–I don't want to hurt you anymore.

"I'll be fine. I won't get hurt."

Balot's expression tightened.

Right now, all she wanted to do was repent, confess to God, to anything.

All she wanted was to have someone say *All is forgiven*.

"He's coming. He's even faster than I thought." Oeufcoque's voice was harsh now.

She could sense the man's footsteps approaching the door at the top of the stairwell.

Tears fell from her face.

She reached out to Oeufcoque—and *snarced* him.

He *turned* with a squelch.

A reassuringly heavy object formed in her hands.

An object with a gun barrel bigger than any she had ever used before.

A gun that would stand up to Boiled's weapon.

This was Oeufcoque's will—and a physical response to the danger that was drawing near. And it was customized perfectly for the situation. The grip of the gun *turned*, squishing into place as a belt that bound the gun to Balot's left hand. A belt that wrapped her tight. Then it moved on to cover her wrist, with metal contraptions designed to deflect the force of the recoiling gun away from her body.

Bullets slid into place inside the metal frame, and the firing hammer cocked automatically.

And then she knew that her opponent was standing on the other side of the door.

She also knew that he'd be expecting her to be standing there, gun trained on him. She sensed his presence.

The air was pregnant with tension, and an unbearable heart-rending silence flowed all around.

Then the silence was abruptly shattered.

The first gunshots all sounded as one. An overwhelming number of bullets sprang into action. In that one instant, Balot fired off everything that she could.

Gunfire echoed all around, along with the piercing metallic sound of bullets clashing in midair.

A number of Balot's bullets had managed to pierce the cannonball-like round that emerged

from Boiled's revolver, shooting it down.

The overpowering smell of charred metal spread, and a dense cloud of smoke filled the area.

When her opponent stopped firing, Balot too paused to eject her magazine, and with it the searing heat that had been building up in her gun.

When she started firing again she could feel the shock from the blasts vibrating in her arms. Balot realized what Oeufcoque had been doing—suppressing all his own instincts to reject her, pushing them deep inside himself so that he could fill himself with bullets and be useful to her, protect her.

In turn, Balot carried on *snarcing* Oeufcoque, helping him to continue. Even as the trigger was pulled and the electronic pulses caused the bullets to fly out the barrel.

She twisted Oeufcoque's heart and pressed down, hard.

Balot's eyes brimmed with tears, and her vision blurred; she fired by sensation alone.

In her sorrow she felt herself go weak in the legs, and her knees suddenly buckled. She crumpled into a heap, her rump now on the rooftop.

A pathetic sight.

Still sitting, she carried on shooting, pushing the gun out in front of her.

From beyond the door, now torn to shreds, Boiled's bullets came at her, relentless, oppressive, crushing.

Balot squeezed Oeufcoque tight and raised the level on her *snarc* up another notch, firing again and again with a face streaked with tears.

She knew that if she didn't, she'd be dead.

How pitiful and pathetic she was, doing all this just to try and save her own life.

Suddenly there was an explosion right beside her, and part of the roof opened up. Balot realized that her aim was starting to falter. And there was nothing she could do about it.

The melee was disrupting her breathing, and her internal rhythm was going haywire.

Unable to withstand the pressure, her emotions were in disarray. Her breast was choked with sorrow, and she saw just how much stronger Boiled was.

Her aim was all over the place now.

The figure of her opponent grew blurrier still.

No longer able to sense where her opponent was aiming, she was gripped by terror, and—without thinking—scrambled for cover, awkwardly trying to get to her feet.

A life-threatening mistake.

Balot realized that she had been shot at.

The bullet flew straight for her face.

Then it happened, in an instant. The gun in her hand jumped up of its own accord.

The gun covered her face, *turning* with a squelch into a thick slab of shock-absorbent material.

Such was Oeufcoque's will.

The bullet hit Oeufcoque. The belt fixed to her hand was blown away, and the gun flew from her fingers and smashed into Balot's face. Her skin tore, and blood poured out from her wound.

Overcome by dizziness in her head, she collapsed, as if she'd just been flung backward.

The gun had—only just—saved Balot's life, but in doing so it was blown to pieces itself.

One of the fragments squelched its way back into the form of Oeufcoque, who gave another cry of anguish.

At the corner of her field of vision Balot saw the golden-haired mouse.

Desperately pulling herself up, she extended her hand toward him.

In turn Oeufcoque suppressed his suffering with all his might and tried to jump back into Balot's hand.

A deadly bullet flew straight at them. Packed with cold, vicious intent.

Paralyzed by fear, Balot couldn't even move—she was petrified on the spot.

But the bullet wasn't aimed at her.

The bullet exploded right in front of her eyes.

The concrete rooftop flew up along with the target. The concrete fragmented and scattered, and a soft bundle of something came flying toward her, bouncing off against her chest.

Oeufcoque's flesh and red blood splattered across Balot's white clothes.

"Balot…" Oeufcoque's voice.

Mind blank, Balot tried to find the source of the voice. "Make me transform into something, quickly." The voice was frail, but full of urgency.

Finally Balot found Oeufcoque. He was the bundle that had just smashed into her chest and bounced off.

The sight of him felt like a hammer blow to the side of her head.

Oeufcoque's lower body was shredded to pieces, and he was crawling along, arm outstretched toward her.

Balot screamed.

But, of course, all that leaked out of her mouth was a dry whistling sound.

Crying, she hastily scooped Oeufcoque up.

That same instant a bullet came flying at her.

She felt a thud in her upper right arm. For a moment she thought her whole arm had been torn off, so powerful was the impact.

Another blow followed to her flank. Her body flew through space. The air stuck in her throat and she lost all sense of up and down.

Her consciousness receded into the distance, but her *Made- by-Oeufcoque* shell protected her to the end.

She slammed into the iron perimeter fence, shoulder first. Thrown down onto the roof, she banged her temple against the concrete, jolting her back into consciousness.

Blood poured from the wound on her forehead, seeping into her right eye so that everything she saw appeared coated by a bright red film.

She was now a sitting duck. But no more bullets came at her.

Instead, the giant man emerged from behind the bullet-riddled door.

Smoothly, as if he had all the time in the world, Boiled walked toward her.

"This gun is you." Boiled stopped a little way away from her. "This gun is what you were, back then. You were made to annihilate, to bring nothingness to this world. Just like me. That's the ultimate answer to all those debates about what we are."

He was standing a good distance away. A good distance to fire words off from, and a good distance to fire bullets off from.

Boiled opened the cylinder of his revolver. Smoking cartridges scattered across the roof. His trigger fingers, and the fingers that he was using to load more cartridges into his revolver, were all covered with burns and blisters.

The cylinder of his revolver clicked back into place.

Gripping his red-hot gun, he turned the muzzle toward Balot.

Balot's left hand touched something soft. Without even looking at it, she knew exactly what it was. Without even looking at it, she knew exactly what it was trying to do. She felt his blood, slippery in her fingers. She closed her eyes, wanting to get a better feel of its warmth.

She heard the firing hammer of Boiled's gun clicking back.

That very same moment, Balot brandished the gun in her hand—the *turned* Oeufcoque.

Two gunshots fired simultaneously, echoing in the night, sparks flying through the darkness.

The two bullets collided in midair, in the space between Balot and Boiled, smashing each other into pieces.

Balot felt a warm sensation in her hands.

Blood flowed from the gun, covering her hands and dripping to the floor.

Crying, Balot squeezed the bleeding gun tight, pulling the trigger over and over.

In order not to die—in order to survive.

Book II:

THE SECOND COMBUSTION

Chapter 5

PISTON

–I don't want to die.

The thoughts were being transmitted to the blood-soaked gun, and every bullet that came flying out of its muzzle was loaded with sorrow.

–I'm so sorry, Oeufcoque. I'm so sorry.

Now Balot understood the meaning of the word *abuse*. She was abusing Oeufcoque. She had turned Oeufcoque into a dangerous tool.

The result was a gun that wept blood. Even after his body had been blown in two, the only thing Balot could do for him was to bring him more blood and tears.

Bullets clashed with bullets, flying through the air and disintegrating into powder, settling over Boiled and Balot like snowfall.

Boiled's bullets made short work of the iron perimeter fence at Balot's side, crumpling a pillar up like so much paper.

Balot didn't even look—she just fired and fired. Her gun was empty in a flash, and as she ejected the spent magazine and the build-up of excess heat, a gush of blood came steaming out.

The gun and her hands were both bright red.

A new magazine clicked into place inside the steel, and the gun was reloaded. It was as if she were firing Oeufcoque's flesh and blood in order to shield herself.

She focused on the bullets flying at her.

She could just about keep these away by sheer force of numbers of her own volleys, but her bullets didn't even get close to Boiled.

PGF—PseudoGravitational Float—was the name of the technology that protected Boiled. It allowed him to activate a gravity field around his body and deflect any bullet that came near him.

"Why, Oeufcoque?" he murmured darkly from beyond his invisible shield.

Boiled fired bullets steeped in murderous intent.

Balot couldn't hear what he had muttered. But her attitude toward him, about how to *deal* with him, was gradually changing.

Take him down. That was what she thought now. The idea of defending herself slipped her mind. All she could think of now was to stop the man from moving. That was the only thing she could get Oeufcoque to do.

But all the bullets Balot fired flew away from their target, their trajectories altered.

Boiled's gun ran out of bullets, and he opened the cylinder to discard the empty shells onto the roof.

His thick fingers reloaded the gun with bullets and venomous hatred. His eyes remained fixed on Balot holding her blood-soaked gun.

"How is that girl any different from me…" His voice was oily, inhuman.

And then the gun was loaded, again, and pointed at Balot, again.

Balot stared at Boiled, unblinking. Her finger was poised over the trigger, ready to fire, but was held back by something.

Then, seizing the moment, she flew forward, throwing caution to the wind. The instant Boiled fired—that was when a tiny gap would open up in his *PGF* to let his bullet out.

One moment, one spot. That was the only opening in Boiled's invisible and otherwise invincible shield.

In her desperate volley of dozens of bullets she had discovered it: the enemy's Achilles' heel.

Boiled noticed immediately that this was what Balot was aiming for.

A gruesome shadow, almost like a faint smile, appeared on Boiled's blank face.

Guns still thrust out at each other. The tension between them was electric.

Blood trickled from a wound on Balot's forehead, mingling with her sweat and tears and dripping from her chin.

"So that's your *usefulness*, is it, Oeufcoque," Boiled said in a heavy voice, firing his gun. "And yet all that's really happened is a new monster has been brought into this world."

A deafening roar resounded across the firmament.

A violent gust of wind blew all around.

The squall from some sort of giant flying object, neither plane nor helicopter.

"Oeufcoque! Balot! I'm here!" Shouting from a megaphone, echoing all around, and Balot and Boiled both looked to the heavens.

Only Balot was visibly surprised by what she saw.

A giant silver egg. An oval shape, over ten meters tall—it was as if a piece of the moon had broken off and descended toward the rooftop.

"A Humpty, is it? The Broilerhouse is sharpening up its response times," Boiled muttered, looking up.

"Boiled, you are ordered to withdraw from the scene!" As the egg broadcast the warning, a part of its body cracked open with a loud noise to reveal a multitude of small hexagonal shapes.

The next moment—and even more noisily—the egg smashed its tip into the roof like that mythical egg of Columbus. Only in this case it was the concrete rooftop that was crushed into place, not the egg.

"Over here, Balot!" The Doctor appeared in the space that had just opened up, brandishing a rifle and shouting. "As of six o'clock this afternoon this case has been approved for the highest level of the Life Preservation Program! All Concerned Parties have been given temporary approval to take up Floating Residence, and hereafter any attempt to trespass on the residence or its inhabitants will be interpreted as intent to harm a material witness and be punishable under the full extent of Commonwealth law!"

Before the Doctor had even finished speaking Boiled's gun was trained on the Doctor.

That instant Balot experienced the feeling of blood rushing to her head, as if it had started churning through her body in reverse.

For she had spotted the one moment, one point, where the chink in Boiled's armor had opened up.

Boiled fired. Had her voice been working, she probably would have shouted out a war cry.

The bullet flew out of Balot's gun—and pierced the back of Boiled's right hand.

Boiled's aim faltered as he was hit, and his bullet slammed into the side of the silver egg, causing an impressive but ineffectual explosion of sparks.

The bullet reached him.

Emotions bubbled up inside Balot, and that very moment Oeufcoque cried out in her hands, "Quickly…to the Doctor!"

Balot snapped upright. Her feelings of wanting to attack Boiled evaporated in an instant, and

all she could now think of was obeying Oeufcoque's words.

Boiled watched with dusky eyes as Balot ran toward the giant silver egg, ignoring the pain that wracked her body. He peeled the gun out of his injured right hand, checked that the grip of the gun hadn't been hit, and lifted it with his other hand.

"Why… Oeufcoque?" Boiled muttered the same words over and over as he fired at Balot.

Balot read his movements precisely and fired back at him. And the Doctor let rip with his rifle at the same time. None of the bullets found their target.

Boiled retreated a step. Balot ran faster toward the silver egg. She thought she heard the crack of another rifle shot, and then the Doctor was hauling her up into the egg.

"Get in and stay inside!" the Doctor shouted, and there were more rifle shots in quick succession.

Without warning the egg started rising. Noiselessly and so smoothly that she didn't even feel the sensation of her body being lifted. All she noticed was the ground moving farther and farther away as she looked on.

Its Gravity Device Engine was evidently a powerful one, as they were up in the air in no time.

"Head as far inside as you can! If you're near the shell wall then your blood will start moving around. If your eyes start blurring then you'll need to lie down. Now, I'm just going to close the shell wall back up and—"

The Doctor stopped shouting. There was a *thud* on the outside wall of the egg.

There were steady, rhythmic footsteps.

The Doctor's expression changed, and he moved toward the entrance, readying his rifle.

Boiled appeared. Revolver in hand, he peered down at the Doctor. He was standing on the wall at a right angle, bisecting the entrance, a perpendicular line, muzzle pointed at the Doctor. At his feet, the wall closed back into place, as if it were mending a broken shell.

"Give it up, Boiled. In a few seconds we'll be at too high an altitude for you to use your abilities," the Doctor warned, almost as if he were giving him a lecture. "And I don't particularly want to get into a shootout with you."

But there was no reasoning with Boiled, who just raised his gun.

"Why did Oeufcoque leave me?"

Still pointing the rifle at Boiled, the Doctor's face now showed a trace of doubt. "You were the one who left him."

Then Boiled leapt, brandishing his gun.

"Stop it! Do you really want to be outlawed from the Commonwealth?" the Doctor shouted, but the blast from his rifle drowned the last part out. The rifle round didn't even scratch Boiled, and Boiled punched the Doctor's slender body, smashing him into the wall.

Having rushed into the egg, Boiled *changed direction*.

And that was the moment. Rather than heading inside, Balot had been sitting there on the floor, waiting for the perfect shot.

Her gun was red. Blood was squelching out of the barrel.

The barrel vibrated. A red object came pounding out. The barrel spat fire, over and over, and even though Boiled managed to cover his vital organs, the bullets all found their mark, whether on his arms or his body.

A ghostly scream surged forth from Boiled's mouth. He'd been too slow to deflect the bullets. As impressive a figure as Boiled was, he was thrown backward. He scrambled for purchase on

the egg, but his feet wouldn't reach. He tried to grab hold of the edge of the entrance with his right hand, but the blood flowing from the wound that Balot had inflicted caused him to slip, losing his grip, and he hurtled into space.

Boiled's scream was already tailing off into the distance when the wall closed, cutting him off completely.

Everything was quiet. Silent, just like the interior of a high-class AirCar.

Balot kept her gun trained on the shell wall. She could no longer lift a finger. Her eyes stared at something. Bloody fingerprints—left by Boiled when he frantically tried to find something to hold on to as he was blown away.

Liquid of the same color dripped down from the end of her gun and stained the carpet.

Red droplets ran from the gun down her wrist, dripping from her elbow.

The Doctor put his rifle down and knelt down at Balot's side. He looked nervous.

"Is Oeufcoque injured?"

Balot's gaze slowly moved from the wall and toward the Doctor, and she nodded.

Her hands still gripped the gun.

"What about you? You've cut your forehead, I see. Anywhere else?"

In a daze, Balot shook her head. She became aware of her surroundings.

The room they were in was like a villa in a holiday resort. A tall ceiling, with a staircase heading up to rooms with windows looking out onto a veranda lobby. Chairs were scattered around a chic table, and the whole place was furnished luxuriously.

The Doctor gently touched Balot's hands.

"This is a Floating Residence, Humpty-Dumpty. Part of *Scramble 09*—originally it was military technology, developed as a flying fortress. The Broilerhouse has given permission for you to use it for a given period in a designated airspace. It's VIP treatment for you all the way now. I personally guarantee to keep you alive, not just as a Trustee but also as a material witness to the second case myself."

The Doctor's hand gently lowered Balot's gun.

"You're safe, now."

Balot felt all the tension in her body evaporate and let go of the gun with her right hand as the Doctor indicated. Blood overflowed, gushing out from every crack in the weapon.

The Doctor tried to pick the gun up, but however hard he tried he couldn't pry it from her left hand.

As she gripped the blood-soaked gun Balot felt a darkness encroaching on her from all sides. Balot was in space. She was inside a silver egg that shone in the darkness, and she was underneath the moon. She understood all of this, neither awake nor dreaming.

The Doctor peeled her rigid fingers from the gun, finger by finger.

"We're flying through the sky as an egg."

The Doctor's face suddenly went puzzled. "Which one of us just said that?"

The gun slipped out of Balot's hands. She heard a song starting to spin around in the back of her mind.

Dish, wash, brush, flush…

She receded from consciousness, but the charm continued, almost like a prayer, rosary beads

and all.

Bash, rush, trash, ash…

The Doctor was saying something. Balot felt like she had turned into an empty vessel. Her body tilted backward, and she toppled over.

Flash, flesh, wish, finish…

And with these words she lost consciousness.

People from the neighborhood were gathering around the building, watching anxiously as fire engines appeared on the scene. A number of police patrol cars appeared, closing off the area, and the Hunters and the firemen all milled around, their roles apparently jumbled together.

Boiled cut across the melee, driven by a sense of purpose. Some Hunters tried to stop him, unsure where he was heading, but he just flashed his PI license and curtly told them that he was on the heels of a material witness and that any police questioning would have to come via the Broilerhouse. The Hunters grumbled some words of abuse, but they let him pass, and he walked on in silence.

Before long Boiled found the gasoline-powered van. An airline company's logos were plastered across its body and smoked windows. The door was unlocked.

As Boiled opened the door, he heard the sound of a trigger being cocked.

Boiled looked at the man in the passenger seat who was holding a gun.

"I thought that someone would come. One of the gang…" the man groaned. "Do you know who I am?"

Boiled took one glance at the man's irregular fingers and nodded silently.

"Medium the Fingernail…that's my nickname. A hound from the greatest pack of hunting dogs in the world. Or that's what we were supposed to be, anyway." Medium spoke through gritted teeth. His other hand was wrapped in a blood-soaked cloth. His fingers had all been blown off from their base.

His whole body was covered with blisters, the left side of his face particularly badly. His left eye was shot through, and blood trickled from both his ears. His legs were limp and lifeless, his knees trembling.

Silently Boiled climbed into the driver's seat. He closed the door and turned the keys that had been left in the ignition, the gun still pointed at him all the while.

The engine revved, and Boiled spoke just loudly enough to be heard over it.

"Everyone except for you is dead."

Medium breathed out heavily, lowering his gun, his hand flopping into his lap, as if to say that he could no longer support its weight.

The vehicle drove off. Medium stared at the entry wound in the back of Boiled's right hand.

"So, this PI called Oeufcoque, he can make himself look like his employers, can he?" Medium spoke with barely suppressed emotion.

Boiled shook his head.

"So *that* was actually our target, was it? That girl who fired her gun and put me in this state before I even knew what was going on?"

"He uses special technology to strengthen his employer, enhancing their combined battle skills. It's all part of *Mardock Scramble 09*, one of the emergency measures that the Broilerhouse

sometimes takes as part of their Life Preservation Program."

When he heard this, Medium crumpled into a weeping wreck. "We were the perfect hunting pack! And a single bitch ruined it all…"

The gun slipped from his hand. It fell between his legs and slid underneath his seat. Medium noticed, then stared at his own hand as if to say *how pathetic*. He opened and closed his fingers, lamenting even as he did so that he no longer had the strength even to pull the trigger.

"We need to pull it back, don't we?" Medium looked at Boiled with pleading eyes. "We men, we set the agenda. It's men who define what beauty is. We define society, we define war, and we even define what is *feminine*—or that's how it used to be, at least. It was men who ruled the world. The *crème de la crème*, the very best. And yet—a woman, a little bitch, did this to me. We need to get our pride back. Isn't that right? I'm right, aren't I?"

Eyes still on the road, Boiled nodded. It was a small but definite movement.

"That's right. We need to get it back," he whispered in a low voice. Great globules of tears now pouring down his face, Medium yelled, voice trembling, "I'm going to kill you! I'll cut you to pieces and *pass you around* to everyone! Just like we all wanted! I'll tear you to shreds and *own* all your body parts!"

02

Balot was in darkness. There was no one near her. She fumbled, trying to escape. She felt that as long as she remained there, she would be subjected to secret horrors…

As she squirmed, Balot noticed a person's shadow.

It was the Doctor. He looked her way and took a step back.

"Wait!" She reached for him but was only quick enough to catch hold of his patchwork gown.

"Where's Oeufcoque?" Balot *said*.

Looking uneasy, the Doctor tried to push Balot back into place. As if Balot had no right to follow the Doctor.

Just then there was a cry of pain from behind the Doctor's back. Her heart stopped. She realized that Oeufcoque was in another room, suffering.

"Please, let me see Oeufcoque!"

But the Doctor wore an expression of reproach, as if he blamed her for Oeufcoque's condition.

"I want to apologize! I just want to say I'm sorry! Please…" Balot pleaded.

The Doctor leaned forward, his face filled with doubt. *Why?* he seemed to want to ask. *How come you're so attached to him, he's just a mouse*, his face seemed to say.

"He never told me to *come out of my shell*. He just took me to a warm place. He's so kind, he'd keep an egg nice and warm even if it was all rotten."

The Doctor tried to push Balot back. Balot struggled desperately to get out of his grip.

"I'm sorry. I'll apologize. I'm sorry. I want to hear his voice. And feel him in the palm of my hand. This time, I'll keep my promise. I won't do anything to hurt him. I promise."

She pressed back against the force that was trying to pin her shoulders down. She heard Oeufcoque's cries of anguish in the distance, and a voice nearer to her asking *why?*

"I don't want to stay here any longer! I want to be where he is!"

The Doctor suddenly let Balot go. He stood over her, like a priest taking confession. Almost as if he were testing her.

Why was she trying to get away from there? Why was she the one who had to leave? A horribly familiar question started to emerge, one that contained multitudes of other questions in a single question—*Why me?*

And with this question, the bitter taste of the acrid smoke was revived in her mouth.

"I don't want to die!"

Balot stood up in the darkness, yelling for all she was worth:

"I…WANT…TO…LIVE!"

And sure enough, that very instant, Balot woke up.

≡

Painfully bright white lights shone down into Balot's eyes from the ceiling. She caught the smell of antiseptic solution and, noticing someone next to her, twisted her body around to look. She gritted her teeth in pain.

Her eyes fell on the figure of a young man.

He had the look of an intellectual about him but wore a cherubic smile. Thin blue veins were visible under the skin of his white forehead. Pale blue eyes stared out at her from under his curly ringlets.

All of a sudden she realized that the youth was holding her hand. Reflexively she tried to shake him off, but he let go of her first. As if he'd sensed Balot's feelings and acted on them before she even knew them for herself.

The young man stood up from the bedside chair and stepped away from Balot as if he were looking for something. There was nothing he could conceivably have been searching for, though. The room was bare.

Other than the bed Balot was lying on and the chair that the young man had just vacated, it was an empty room.

Everything was stowed away in the walls—it seemed like an expensive private hospital room.

Balot glanced at the door. It had an electric lock, but it was currently off. If she were to touch the panel in front of the door, it should open. That was if the young man didn't try and stop her first.

Perhaps he'd sensed Balot's wariness, for the young man raised both arms in the air and shook his head. Like a playful child. He seemed to just be *interested* in Balot.

It was as if he were a kid who'd just returned from his holidays, impatient to catch up with his friends and swap all the gossip.

Watching the young man carefully, Balot raised a hand to feel what she was wearing. A hospital gown made from insulating material—just like she'd been wearing when she first met the Doctor. The same size, performing the same function.

The young man wore clothes of the same material as Balot. He took something from his pants pocket and rolled it toward Balot. It stopped by her knee. The young man pointed at his ear. Balot picked up the earphone and, staring at the young man, placed it in her right ear.

–Hello.

The earphone spoke. Balot looked at the young man in surprise.

–I heard that your snarc *abilities give you an Interference Rate of over 80 percent. Really amazing! So I thought this would be easier for you than speaking.*

The young man pushed his forelocks apart. Somewhat surprisingly, Balot saw a protuberance on his forehead, almost like the horn of a young deer.

He tapped his forehead.

–I can speak using this. And listen to what you have to say. So I don't need earphones.

He used the same finger to roll up his sleeves and rub his upper arm.

–This is what you use to speak with. You might have a good Interference Rate, but your reception abilities aren't too developed yet, are they? I imagine that the best you can do is reduce a bit of electronic data into basic audiovisual signals.

The young man grinned, head tilted to one side. Balot nodded.

–In my case, it's not that I can't speak, it's just that I forget to speak. To breathe as well. So whenever I do speak it tires me out. You can't speak either, right?

Balot started to nod again, then stared at the young man's mouth.

She sensed his pulse and tried to calculate his breathing patterns based on it.

–This is Paradise.

The young man waved his arm in a broad circle, indicating his surroundings.

–Originally, it was the Facility for Experimental Space Strategy. Now everyone just calls it Paradise. I think I can understand why. It's a very peaceful place, after all.

Balot's eyes opened wide. Not at what he said. Rather because he wasn't breathing *at all*.

–My name's Tweedledee, the young man said.

–Welcome to the birthplace of all forbidden technologies—Paradise. Rune-Balot. Looks like we're brother and sister.

–Can I get you anything? Tweedledee asked. He opened a compartment in the wall, reaching in to pull out a cup.

–How about a coffee? My mouth's sole purpose in life is now to taste things, you see…

Balot didn't answer. She wasn't sure if she could trust this Tweedledee, and she had no idea where she was now—couldn't make up her mind about the place she was in.

And if she couldn't make up her mind for herself then she wanted someone she could trust.

–Where's the Doctor? Balot asked Tweedledee. She wasn't so much *snarcing* him by interfering with the currents in the air anymore; it was more like she was thinking the words *at* him.

–The Doctor? Oh, you mean Dr. Easter? He seems to be busy at the moment.

–Will you let me see him?

She tried to stand, but her whole body was aching. Her muscles cried out in pain. Heat compresses were wrapped around both her wrists, with similar patches all over her body.

With a jerk, Balot thrust both legs out of the bed. There was a pair of slippers to the side of the bed, and she struggled to reach them.

–Bruises all over. But your bones seem fine at least! Something about Balot's condition seemed to amuse Tweedledee.

–You really would be better off resting, you know. If you don't like coffee, there are plenty of other drinks on offer—take your pick.

–I want to see the Doctor.

–What do you need him for?

–I want to speak to him. To ask him if I can trust this place—and you.

Tweedledee didn't quite seem to understand what Balot meant.

–I can try and answer any questions you have in the meantime. But eventually he seemed to get that this wasn't enough for Balot.

–Dr. Easter is probably working on Oeufcoque's maintenance at the moment. It's just that the other doctors might get a bit fussy about having outsiders in the lab.

–You said we were brother and sister?

Tweedledee thought about this for a while. He watched Balot put her slippers on.

–Ah, I get you, he said, smiling sweetly.

They left the room, and Balot's eyes were assaulted by vivid green. They were on an open terrace.

One side of the corridor wall and ceiling was made out of glass, framed in steel. Beyond the glass was the thick green foliage of closely planted trees, and through the narrow gaps between the trees she could see that the space sloped gently downward.

Inside the thick, reinforced glass it was warm and comfortable. The sunlight beat down on Balot and Tweedledee, casting distinctive shadows.

–I wonder if everyone on the outside is like you?

–What do you mean?

–Hmm, not sure how best to put it, Tweedledee muttered in his mind, seemingly enjoying himself. He even enjoyed the sound of the slippers as they flip-flopped along the corridor.

–Like a know-it-all Eve.

–Eve?

–I wonder if Adam felt the same way when Eve gave him the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. That he just couldn't refuse her. *Regardless of what was right or wrong.*

Balot leaned in toward him.

–Who are you, exactly? And what are you doing here?

–I was born severely handicapped. I probably wouldn't have survived childhood anyway, my parents thought, so they donated my body to research—military experiments. So I ended up in Paradise.

–Your own parents—?

–Yup, never even seen their faces, Tweedledee said, as if he didn't have a single worry in the world.

–Oh, and by "experiments" I'm talking about experimental procedures to give me back my bodily functions. I was only able to start moving at all because I was brought here. And I've lived here ever since. Once every three years I'm allowed outside with the doctors in order to collect data, but it's far more relaxing inside, to be honest.

Balot nodded. This was indeed a comforting place. There was hardly anyone around, and they were safe and sound inside their airtight glass birdcage. There were automated vacuum cleaners built into the lower parts of all the walls, and the air conditioning kept everything at a constant temperature and humidity. There wasn't a trace of dust anywhere, and the surfaces were all gleaming.

Even though she wore slippers over her bare feet and only had a robe on, she felt no chill or any sense of discomfort. Just like when she first woke up in the former mortuary, right back at the start of the case.

This was the birthplace of all forbidden technologies—so Tweedledee told her. In other words, this was the laboratory where Oeufcoque and the Doctor were based before they went off to become Trustees in charge of *Scramble 09* cases. Balot didn't even hazard a guess as to why she might now be in such a place, but rather she asked,

–Was it the Doctor who gave you that horn on your head?

She wasn't really thinking about what she was saying.

Tweedledee's eyes flickered, and he shook his head.

–No. My thing here just decided to grow of its own accord, something to do with the influence of the technology used to accelerate my sensory perception.

–But the Doctor did use to work here?

–Dr. Easter is the youngest member of the team here. He's known as the Black Sheep.

–Black Sheep?

–When it became necessary for a scapegoat to accept responsibility for the alleged war

crimes, he voluntarily put himself forward as the sacrificial lamb. Well, there were a few who had to do this, but Dr. Easter was a special case.

–In what way special?

–Out of all the researchers, he was the biggest advocate of the view that their research should be turned over for the benefit of civilians. So, when the Three Magi put forward their proposal for Scramble 09*, he was the first volunteer. Even though he'd go straight to prison if it failed. That's why he's the Black Sheep.*

–Three Magi?

–The three founders of Paradise. Two of them have left, of course, so it's just the One Wise Man at the moment.

***–The two who left set up** Mardock Scramble?* Balot asked, thinking that the conversation was starting to take a strange turn. It wasn't really hitting home that they were now talking about how she, ultimately, was rescued just a little while ago.

–No, one of them originated the idea of Mardock Scramble*, but the other one thought of a different path and opposed the abolition of the Research Facility.*

–A different path?

–She founded OctoberCorp.

Balot's footsteps stopped abruptly.

–What's the matter?

Tweedledee looked puzzled. Balot shook her head absentmindedly. She felt as if she'd just been told why she was killed and why she was saved all at once.

Suddenly Balot remembered what the Doctor had said right at the very start, when they first met. OctoberCorp—whose *usefulness* consisted of supplying a steady stream of amusement to the denizens of Mardock City—was his nemesis, against everything that he and Oeufcoque stood for.

Still, Balot had no idea what she was supposed to do with this information at the moment.

–Is Oeufcoque also known as a Black Sheep? Balot asked. She resumed walking.

–Nah, he's the Golden Egg. All the other researchers at Paradise wanted a piece of him.

Tweedledee giggled.

–But all he wanted to do was get outside. And the researcher who founded Scramble 09 *was also Oeufcoque's inventor, you see. So no one could stop him from leaving Paradise. But everyone says they never imagined in a million years he'd end up teaming up with the Black Sheep or the Rusty Gun.*

He suddenly turned to Balot as if he'd just noticed her for the first time.

–The Rusty Gun is a man that you know. Dimsdale-Boiled.

Only when he spoke his name did she actually get it.

–Sounds like you're the one who knows everything.

Balot shrugged her shoulders, bracing herself against the pain that inevitably followed.

She was beginning to relax around this young man, so intelligent and yet so innocent. The idea of conflict seemed to be an alien concept to this Tweedledee. He had the placid demeanor of someone who had never been troubled by any sort of disturbances during his upbringing—and yet he wasn't excessively clingy or needy.

Hand on the wall, Balot moved on, dragging her whole body along with her. Her muscles were inflamed, and in particular both her wrists were swollen. Yet Tweedledee made no effort to help

her or even to adjust his pace to match hers. He talked as he liked and walked as he liked. Not selfishly, exactly, for every once in a while he paused to give Balot the opportunity to catch up. He showed no sign of irritation or impatience.

He's probably used to this, Balot thought. *Tweedledee sees people in a far worse state than me on a daily basis.* That was the feeling she got from him.

As she was thinking this, three people emerged from around a corner.

All were old. A man wearing a black hat, a man in an electric wheelchair, and a woman wearing sunglasses were in the midst of a lively conversation as they headed toward Balot and Tweedledee.

The man wearing the black hat was the first to notice Balot and Tweedledee, and stopped.

"Ah, Tweedledee, taking that young lady for a walk, are you?"

–Yes, I'm showing her around, Tweedledee informed them. All three of the elders had hearing aids embedded in their inner ears; Tweedledee transmitted his speech directly to the devices.

The man took his hat off and bowed to Balot. Thousands of little connector terminals were planted in his head, so many that they almost looked like a second set of hair.

"Is this young lady a new experimental candidate, Tweedledee?"

–No. She's a client of Dr. Easter.

"Client…? From the outside world?" the man asked, puzzled. "Dr. Easter's lab seems to have its lights on at the moment—is he back with us? Is he conducting some unauthorized experiments on his own? Without publishing an official code name?"

–Her name's Balot. Rune-Balot.

"I'm sure that no such code name has been registered," the man answered.

The old woman beside him was next to speak, blue eyes twinkling behind her sunglasses. "The regenerative metal fibers seem to suit her very well. Beautiful skin. Have you measured her Interference Rate yet? Do you know how far she is into her threshold of consciousness?"

–She's over 80 percent.

"How marvelous." The old woman's eyes and ears were fully mechanized, and her electronically produced voice was indistinguishable from the real thing.

The man in the wheelchair scooted around to Balot's flank and asked, "Is it the aftereffects of the Lightite skin graft that makes her unable to walk straight?"

Balot shook her head. She wasn't sure how best to answer this question.

"I think that Pod Number 3 is free at the moment. Let's have her swim in the Sheep-Dip Craft for a while. She hasn't shared her data yet, has she? Her muscle pulse may have been overridden by the sudden acceleration of her senses," the man in the wheelchair continued, happily letting everything go right over Balot's head.

–She has an appointment with Dr. Easter right now.

When Tweedledee said this, the man in the wheelchair assumed a sullen expression. "And do you have a good reason for monopolizing her data?"

–Dr. Easter said it's because she's a civilian.

The word *civilian* seemed to have a magical effect on the three old people, who drew back immediately.

"You'll be sure to get data that we can usefully adapt, at least?" The man in the wheelchair pressed his point nonetheless.

Balot was bewildered by this exchange, and a sense of discomfort closed in on her.

–We have to hurry, I'm afraid. And we really don't know much about the details.

Tweedledee spoke quickly, as if he had sensed Balot's feelings.

"Well, we'll file a request for data sharing. Until then, be sure not to upset your biorhythm." The tall man placed his hat back on his head. The old woman gave Balot a bow. "Take care of yourself, young lady. I'd love to have tea with someone with as much aptitude as you. Tweedledee, you'll have tea with me, won't you?"

–I'll think about it.

The old woman laughed. Then the three old people fell back into their previous lively conversation and were gone.

–You have to watch their tea parties—they go on for a while. They pile on the medication in order to conduct their little examinations. And then there's their biorhythmic indices and inspections…

Watching the backs of the three old people as they disappeared down the corridor, Balot thought about how they differed from the Doctor.

She wouldn't have said that they were bad people in any way. But she couldn't imagine herself ever becoming friendly with them.

–The Doctor tried to restore my voice for me. Without my even having to ask.

–Huh?

–I can't imagine those three ever doing the same.

Tweedledee shrugged his shoulders, as if to say *So what? No big deal.*

But it *was* a big deal. Balot understood all too well why the Doctor and Oeufcoque had wanted to leave this facility for the outside world.

They arrived at a door that was tightly shut, and Tweedledee turned around.

–You really need to see Dr. Easter right now?

–Oeufcoque's in there too, right?

Tweedledee gave a look to say *I see it all now.*

–So it was Oeufcoque that you wanted to see.

Tweedledee looked at the intercom on the door.

–But he's in the middle of maintenance at the moment. He's lost half his body, so I wonder if he'll be able to speak.

His words pierced Balot to her core.

Tweedledee manipulated the intercom, *snarcing* it, and the signal light started flashing.

–What is it? Oh, it's you, Tweedledee. What do you want? came the Doctor's voice.

–Rune-Balot is awake.

–Balot?

There was a rattling commotion from inside, and by and by the door slid open sideways.

"I thought I told you to come and call me the moment Balot regained consciousness!" The Doctor appeared in the doorway, unimpressed.

–I thought it would be quicker to bring her here directly to you. Tweedledee still spoke through the intercom.

"She's a civilian, you know. Officially we need special dispensation to get her permission to even walk down the corridors…" The Doctor sighed as he pushed his spectacles back up onto the

bridge of his nose. The graphs and numbers that had been showing on his Tech Glasses—on the monitor in his spectacles—disappeared, and his blue eyes were now fixed on Balot.

"I'll explain why we're all here later. Right now, I need you to rest your body."

Balot stared back at the Doctor and asked,

–Where's Oeufcoque?

"He's under treatment. From me. You don't need to worry about him." The Doctor seemed to be blocking Balot's way, both physically and with his words. "Remember how you didn't want him to see you naked? Well, consider that he doesn't want you to see him in his present state for very much the same reason. Also, he's in some sort of shock. I don't know exactly why…but I think it's best if you let him alone for now, just for the time being."

When Balot heard this she was filled with such sadness that her eyes went dark. And yet, wasn't it none other than Oeufcoque who had taught her not to just ignore her sadness, but to try and do something about it?

–Oeufcoque said that we were partners…

"Well, I'm not—"

–I want to apologize. I just want to say I'm sorry.

The Doctor averted his eyes, troubled, and Balot took advantage of this.

–Please.

Balot slipped by him. She had read the Doctor's movements completely.

"Hey, Balot!" Taken aback, the Doctor reached out to try and stop her, but he couldn't even make contact—she dodged nimbly out of his grasp.

–Even though it was such a struggle for her to walk this far…

Tweedledee was full of admiration, as if he had watched an impressive display of showmanship, and pulled the Doctor's arm back.

–What harm can she do? She just wants to say hello.

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak but remained silent.

Balot went on into the room.

Instruments were scattered all around, and in the middle there was a cylindrical water tank. It was about as wide as Balot, and it was full of liquid, with something unrecognizable floating on the surface.

She couldn't tell at first glance whether this was Oeufcoque or not, but her intuition told her that it was.

Flesh and steel spiraled out from something that looked like a vivid red human embryo.

She realized in an instant that this was Oeufcoque's body, turned inside out.

It had a gentle pulse, and it was living inside the nearly clear liquid, basking in the warmth of the red blood swirling around the body.

Balot touched the water tank with her hand. Then she rested her forehead on it, closing her eyes as if to pray a silent prayer.

The clumps of flesh and steel stirred. They seemed to have noticed Balot's presence. Here and there they started *turning* squishily, contracting.

Forehead still on the water tank, Balot shook her head.

The Doctor, who was watching this, turned back to Tweedledee. "Are they having a conversation?"

Tweedledee shrugged his shoulders.

–"I'm sorry I was so useless, and that I put you in danger as a result. Forgive me," that's what he's saying.

The Doctor nodded. *And then?*

–"I love you."

"Oeufcoque said that?"

–No, the girl.

Tweedledee seemed amazed.

Then Balot planted a kiss on the outside of the water tank. Softly, carefully. Then she came away from the tank and walked back toward the Doctor.

–He says he's going to sleep for a while.

Balot raised her eyebrows, scowling.

–Will he be okay?

She knew that if she stopped scowling she'd start crying.

"It's my job to make sure he will be." The Doctor spoke with a serious face, pushing his glasses up again, when Tweedledee tapped his arm.

–Hey, can I take her down to the pool? She's scheduled to go there soon, isn't she?

The Doctor's face hardened somewhat. "She's not using *that* until I've gone over a few things with her. She's owed an explanation. She's going to be leaving the facility soon. Along with us."

–I get it. You don't want Eve to accidentally taste the forbidden fruit, right? I get it. As long as she doesn't have temptation placed right before her eyes, she'll be able to resist.

–I don't have to breathe, ever.

Tweedledee spoke as a school student might boast about what a fine home he came from.

–According to the doctors, I'm a Complete Individual. That's my thing.

–A Complete Individual?

–Means I'm not dependent on my environment. That my core is even tougher than my shell—I'm completely hard-boiled.

Clopping along in her slippers, Balot considered the meaning of these words.

Everywhere in the building seemed to be divided by glass panes. It was like being in a giant box—all the slopes were covered in iron and concrete and glass.

Grinning, Tweedledee told Balot all about the facility and himself. Balot felt a bit like a transfer student. As if she were supposed to be here, and indeed, were destined to stay here from now on.

–I don't have to breathe. And I barely eat. Even when I do eat, all I have is a bit of light. And I don't even really need that.

–You don't eat?

Balot seemed surprised again, much to Tweedledee's obvious delight.

–My body needs to change its fluids every once in a while. The challenge is to make that exchange as simple as possible, apparently.

–Can you taste things?

–Sure, I can taste. I can even feel hungry if I want to. By snarcing *my insides, of course. But most of the time I don't feel anything. Back then, I thought I might taste coffee again, as it's been a while, and I tried to remember what it was like to feel thirsty, but then you said you didn't want any.*

–Sorry.

She didn't actually feel particularly apologetic—she just didn't know what else to say.

–No worries. It's not as if I actually needed to drink anything. I have thousands of little hard drives embedded inside my head, so I can bring up lots of senses or tastes anytime I want.

–So it's like you have a library inside your head?

Tweedledee made a funny face.

Then, he seemed to understand. Balot realized in that instant that Tweedledee had looked something up in the dictionary inside his mind. What a *library* was.

–That's right. There are lots of books and dictionaries in here. And I can replay audio and visuals too. More or less any stimulus that can be processed by the five senses, in fact. But I try not to cram too much in. My snarc *abilities seem to suit me better. It's different with other people, of course—some people find that the more information they're weighed down with, the more they want to acquire additional information… What about you? Do you want to store something inside yourself?*

–No, it's okay. When I need to use a library, I'll go to a library.

–I wonder if you'll be able to stop yourself from becoming like us.

–I'm not sure. I don't really know what "like us" means.

–Complete Individuals, that's what I'm talking about, Tweedledee said, as if that phrase explained everything.

Eventually the glass-clad corridor came to a dead end. A sturdy electronic lock was on the door, and Tweedledee had to submit to retina and fingerprint scans to get it to open.

The thick doors slid apart.

–Welcome to the Inner Courtyard. The heart of Paradise.

Balot stared out into an expanse of tropical rainforest. Colorful flowers and fruit spread out before her, as far as the eye could see. She looked up and saw all sorts of trees stretching up to a high ceiling and sensed that there was another ceiling above it, replete with an artificial lighting rig. The light felt just like real sunlight, and there was a certain mellowness in the air. A warm breeze drifted all around, caressing her face and clothes, making her feel extremely comfortable.

–Amazing… Balot spoke her true feelings this time. She was genuinely moved.

–It's nice here. Tweedledee's voice was proud, triumphant even, and he *snarced* the doors so that they closed shut behind him.

A path made out of plastic divided the foliage, and Tweedledee walked down it, heading deep into the undergrowth. Balot followed after him.

Here and there was a clearing. It looked exactly like the sort of conservation area that Balot had seen on television and in magazines. The only difference was that there were big umbrellas in the clearing, a bit like beach parasols, and underneath them were tables and chairs, or in some cases complicated-looking equipment.

They came across the trio of old people that they had bumped into earlier. The man with the hat and the woman with sunglasses lounged back on what looked like deck chairs and were engaged in what seemed like a lively debate with the man in the wheelchair.

They soon passed the group, and Balot followed Tweedledee deeper into the undergrowth. This really was some room. It may have indeed been airtight, but it was such a vast space that it was a struggle for Balot to think of it as such.

Balot suddenly realized that the path was sloping downward. They seemed to be heading underground. But there was no trace of the damp and dark that one usually associated with the underground—this still felt like a lush and beautiful park.

Balot noticed a number of people scattered around, lying under the bowers of the trees, all wearing similar clothes to Tweedledee. They all had unusually pale skin, and some of them were in wheelchairs. They all seemed content to stare up into the sky in silence.

Balot sensed something going back and forth between them, and she realized that they were all deep in conversation.

It was a strange sight. With eyes half closed, barely even twitching, they were engaged in vigorous conversation.

–People who've stopped moving, Tweedledee explained.

–Just as I forget to breathe, these people forget to move. Some of them do still want to move about occasionally, so they use wheelchairs.

–They can't walk anymore?

–Oh, I'm sure they could, if it came down to it. They just don't really need to.

–So why are *you walking about, then?*

–The doctors seem to think it's due to differing motivations. I wasn't able to move when I was born, so I must be delighted with the fact that I can move now, or something like that. Still,

in time, I might forget to walk as well.

–Are there no others here who walk?

–Oh, there are. Shall I introduce you to some of them?

–No, you're quite enough.

She hadn't meant it in a particularly complimentary way, but Tweedledee seemed pleased.

–Okay, well, how about I introduce you to just one other. My lover. Balot was surprised.

–Your lover?

–Yup. That's the term I use, anyway. And vice versa. It seems a fitting term. Whenever we're together, we feel like sweethearts.

Tweedledee's footsteps sped up. Balot did her best to keep pace.

Curiously, she didn't sweat at all. It was as if the air were gently wiping her body down. Air designed to give people a calm, pleasant feeling all over. To the extent that you never wanted to move again.

–Can you swim?

Tweedledee asked, and Balot nodded.

–Then let's go for a swim together. It should be good for your muscles too; it'll help get them back to normal.

Suddenly she understood what he was talking about.

The trees opened up, and in the clearing was a giant pool carved into the greenery, an impressive oblong pool; she could barely see the opposite shore, and the water seemed very deep.

There were no people in the vicinity of the pool, but rather lots of animals—monkeys, and a type of rodent that Balot couldn't quite identify—that were swimming or splashing about.

Balot knelt down to put her hand to the water. She noticed some ripples coming toward her. She realized that they were generated to keep the water circulating. Without warning the ripples changed to waves. The next moment a smooth blue object flew up into the air, scattering light all around. It landed back into the water with a huge splash, spraying water all around.

Balot was soaked through. She saw the thing that had just jumped stick its snout forward.

–Who's this, Tweedledee? Never seen it before. You brought it, did you?

The snouty-thing's voice echoed in Balot's earphones, much to her surprise.

–That's right. She's called Rune-Balot.

Tweedledee jumped into the pool. He had taken his clothes off without Balot noticing and was now naked. There was a splash when he hit the water, spraying Balot again as she stood there.

Tweedledee swam up to the snouty-thing, gave it a big hug, and planted a kiss on its head.

–She's Oeufcoque's lover. I brought her here because I wanted to introduce you.

Balot hadn't quite expected Tweedledee to introduce her in this way.

–Hey, baby. I'm Tweedledum, the thing said to her. It seemed to have nothing to hide, anyway.

–I know my name's similar to his, but mine's the original. After all, some of my brain cells were transplanted into his brain.

It thrust its body out of the water and prodded her face with its pointy snout.

–So, little lady, how about a ride on my back? I'll take you to heaven and back, baby.

Balot was a little bewildered. It was the first time she'd ever been propositioned by a dolphin.

–Hey, I'm the original! Part of my brain is transplanted in you too, don't forget. And let's not forget that your linguistic consciousness is based on my language skills… Tweedledee tried to interject, but Tweedledum hadn't finished yet.

–Shut it, you slag! There's no contest. You're the one who toddles around based on my mobility consciousness. You wouldn't be walking without me.

–And you *wouldn't be talking without* me.

Then the two turned to Balot. *What do you think?* Talk about being put on the spot.

Balot felt a little funny in the head, but it wasn't the worst feeling in the world.

Above all, Tweedledee was probably the only person in the world who would introduce Oeufcoque as her lover.

–Tweedledum, are you a girl?

Balot spoke to change the subject. Tweedledum snorted spume from his nostrils.

–Hey, you're a human, right? Don't be so narrow-minded—you'll end up a slave to convention. I'm male, and this guy's brother, and lover, and homosexual partner. We even do it *all the time.*

He spoke rather triumphantly, and it was hard to tell how much was true and how much was Tweedledum's fevered imagination.

–What are those eyes?

Not particularly wanting to pursue her line of inquiry any further, Balot changed the subject to the metal objects that covered the space between Tweedledum's brow and cheeks. They looked like giant dolphin sunglasses.

–They're neat, huh? Wanna try on a pair yourself, babe? Tweedledum answered, rather unhelpfully, but Tweedledee shrugged his shoulders and answered Balot's question properly.

–They're for access—an auxiliary function. They can act as visual organs too, but we don't really need to rely on our sense of sight in the first place.

–Access?

–This pool is a giant computer terminal.

–What do you mean?

–Why don't you come for a swim too? Then you'll see for yourself. Balot seemed to have fallen into a pattern of doing whatever the two wanted. She thought about it for a second, then sat down at the edge of the pool. She lowered her legs into the water and immediately felt convinced that she wouldn't drown.

Balot plunged into the water, as invited. It was wonderfully clean water—transparent and soft. It was a little bit on the chilly side, but even this felt like a good thing, appeasing the inflamed bruises that covered her body.

She immersed her whole body in water, then bobbed around, sticking her head above the surface. Tweedledee looked at the emerging face of Balot with an odd expression.

–The doctors get a bit fussy when we get our clothes wet, so best you take them off, you know.

–I'm fine as I am. If I want to take them off, I'll take them off.

Suddenly Tweedledum was underneath her, lifting her up. It was the first time she had ever been on a dolphin's back. Her body floated up and slid along the surface as if she were running.

Her shoulders relaxed unconsciously. If her voice had worked, she'd be laughing loudly by now.

–Hold on tight, baby. I'll show you this pool's true colors.

Tweedledum was on a natural high.

–Welcome to the other ocean!

At this moment in time, Balot had no idea that before long this would lead directly on to the next stage of her case. All she was concerned about for the time being was closing her mouth. For Tweedledum had just plunged underwater. Tweedledee was by their side, swimming like a fish.

Balot opened her eyes, but they could see only a small part of her surroundings, so she sensed them instead. They were indeed in some sort of computer terminal. Wireless communication equipment was growing out of one of the walls and the floor. And spread out before her was a vast, deep ocean. She realized that she was confronted with the gateway to a giant sea of electronic data.

–Take me back up!

She wasn't sure how much longer her breath would last, and started to panic.

–Right away, missy, brought to you in style! Tweedledum said with a flourish, starting the ascent in his own inimitable style. It wasn't a sudden ascent, but rather a careful and steady climb that took Balot's body into account. It could indeed have been described as a stylish ascent.

They reached the surface, and Balot drew a deep breath, pushing her wet hair out of her face.

–Scary, dark, and big. She voiced her first impressions of the pool.

Tweedledum gave another great snort from his nostrils.

–It's like Spaceship Earth herself; mostly water, there to be experienced and lived in. This is the key to transmitting data to almost anywhere in the world. You can swim almost anywhere, as long as you have permission.

Then Tweedledee emerged, floating face-up on the surface of the water.

–Not that anyone's been given permission over the last ten years, right, Tweedledum?

–Still, we're free to splash about in Paradise's database as much as we like. Shall we head back down, babe?

–I'm okay for now, thanks. I'm not sure my breath will hold up.

Balot gently pushed away from Tweedledum, heading backward in the water.

She tried to swim on her own but found herself tangled up in her clothes. She tried to take them off, turning around as she did so. Suddenly some air escaped from her mouth—her earphone was about to dislodge, and, flustered, she tried to hold its clasp in place. Tweedledum moved in swiftly to prop her body up, helping to keep her afloat. Balot stripped off her sodden clothes, and Tweedledee collected them, spreading them out neatly by the side of the pool for her.

Balot wasn't wearing any underwear. Fully nude now, she entrusted her naked body to the water. It was as if all her aches and pains had dissolved into the pool. She felt no anxiety, no awkwardness. Neither of the other two made any effort to touch her body unnecessarily. They didn't even seem particularly interested in it.

Tweedledum appeared to be constantly accessing the database, picking up pieces of information and passing them on to Tweedledee, laughing, flirting, even.

Both Tweedledee's and Tweedledum's bodies appeared to be covered in scars. Fragments of metal and plastic also seemed to be protruding from various parts of their bodies—chest and sides in particular. To the extent that you could say that their bodies were almost mangled. And yet neither of them seemed remotely self-conscious about these modfications—they didn't seem to be bothered in the slightest.

Balot watched the two of them frolicking about and thought about what Tweedledee had said.

The Complete Individual, swimming though an electronic ocean. A complete world—like an

egg. This jungle, in its airtight chamber, was designed to be detached, kept apart, from something. But what? She couldn't tell.

The duo's laughter permeated the jungle. The laughter of those untroubled by the threat of the outside world—or of decay from within.

To realize the dream of sunny side up—a life without trouble, without consequence—and to eventually arrive at a state of such tranquillity that you no longer needed to move. Balot wasn't sure whether to be envious or scornful of such a lifestyle.

All of a sudden she yearned to speak to Oeufcoque and the Doctor. She wanted them to tell her what she ought to do. But, as they weren't here right now, she guessed that it would be up to her to work that out for herself.

So, as she swam along, she tried to think as the Doctor and Oeufcoque would think.

The Doctor and Oeufcoque would be brainstorming, thinking up various strategies as to how best to proceed. What would those strategies be, those threads of ideas? This was a competition, and a game. At one end of those threads was the man called Shell. Shell was trying to protect something, and that was why he'd had Boiled and the assassins pull on their end of the thread…

Suddenly, it dawned on Balot—there was something she needed to find.

–Hey, do you think that we'd be able to get permission for me to use this pool?

Tweedledee was taken aback.

–Gosh, I didn't think Eve was going to ask to eat the forbidden fruit of her own accord!

The Doctor's words came flooding back to Balot. *She's not using* that *until I've gone over a few things with her. She's owed an explanation.* Balot realized that the Doctor must have been talking about the computer terminal in the pool. And she knew in an instant what exactly it was that she would be using it *for*.

–What are you going to look up?

Tweedledum was excited now.

–There's this man who's hidden his past. I want to know where it is.

–Past? Whose past?

–A man called Shell-Septinos. An employee at OctoberCorp.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum turned to each other.

–What shall we do?

–You should go call the Professor, Tweedledee. I don't want to end up disposed of *just for opening up an outside line without official clearance, you know.*

–You're right.

Tweedledee pushed up against the ledge of the pool and jumped out.

He brushed the water off his body and slipped into his pants.

–Wait here, Balot. I'll introduce you to the god of Paradise.

He headed off straight back into the rainforest, leaving Balot behind.

Balot swam with Tweedledum as they waited for Tweedledee's return.

As she gave herself up to the water, her medicinal compresses began peeling off, and even the bandages on her wrists started to come loose. Eventually all her bandages started floating to the surface, and before long they were swallowed up by small contraptions at the edge of the pool that looked like miniature garbage disposal chutes.

It truly was a well-designed pool. The water was maintained at a perfect temperature, and it was kept constantly clean.

–What did Tweedledee mean by "god of Paradise"?

–Oh, just that he's easy to anger—the wrath of god and all that.

Then Balot heard laughter. Through her earphone, but also with something at the back of her mind, using her interference abilities, her *snarc*. It was almost like telepathy. And it seemed to be unaffected by whether she was on the surface of the water or underneath it.

–He's the Supreme Warden of all of Paradise's creatures—that's one of his titles, anyway. If I said that he was one of the Three Magi, would that ring a bell?

–I heard that the Three Magi made this place…but I don't know the details.

–Not to worry, babe, all will be revealed shortly, Tweedledum said as if to say that was the end of the matter, and dived below Balot. Her body was lifted up, and Tweedledum's head appeared right in front of her, nostrils flaring.

–Are you the only one who lives here, Tweedledum?

–Nah, there's plenty of others, but I'm the best value. Should I call the rest here? Some of them are at death's door, though.

–It's okay. I don't really want anyone to die on my account.

Tweedledum laughed again.

–Not many of the others can really speak like me, anyway. It probably wouldn't be much fun.

–The others—are they all dolphins too?

–The majority, yeah, but not all. There's also whales, but they're too big to make it into this section. There's also sharks and orcas, but they're in the minority, and they're blocked from entering here, so don't you worry. I don't really get on with those guys, truth be told. Tweedledee is pretty good at handling them, though.

Balot was clinging to Tweedledum's back now, and she *snarced* Tweedledum's silver sunglasses directly.

–You know Oeufcoque, right?

–Yeah, I know him. He was here up until about six years ago. He's just like me, a creature that was created to order on commission from the military.

–Did you get along with him?

–I got along with him well enough, yeah. I have no problems with that type of person. He's a good egg. Handy having him around too. He's not perfect, of course, plenty of character flaws, but basically I'd say he's a good choice for a lover, babe.

–It's only you two who refer to him in that way.

–What do you mean?

–He doesn't seem to think of me in that way.

–Unrequited love, is it?

Balot didn't answer for a long time. Eventually Tweedledum broke the silence with a cheerful laugh.

–Well, he's a half-baked little thing, always indecisive and wishywashy. "I might only be a little mouse, but I'm a thinking mouse," that's the sort of thing he used to bellow. He'd do well to chill out a little.

–He finds it hard to tell a lie.

–Yeah, his species sniffs out emotions through body odor, Tweedledum said frankly, as if that explained everything. Seeing that it didn't, he shook his head and continued.

–He doesn't even really understand what it is to tell a lie. That's what makes him so awkward and indecisive. What a guy to fall for, right? Well, you'll have plenty of time to work it out. It'll test your patience, though.

Balot laughed in spite of herself. She'd never thought the day would come that she would listen to a dolphin giving her advice on how to love a mouse. The whole world had gone crazy—but was none the worse for it. The world had always been a crazy place, and it might as well go that extra mile and get it over with.

My reality is just that—my reality. As she thought this, she relaxed, and her emotions seemed to extend even further. Not that they hadn't been spreading before, but now she felt that they had finally reached her heart. She was thawing.

–I did a terrible thing to Oeufcoque.

–Hey, where did that come from?

Tweedledum slowed down, surprised.

–I used him so hard that I ended up abusing him. And even then, he protected me to the bitter end.

–Okay, I get it now. He's back here for maintenance because of—

–Because of me. I'm the one who made Oeufcoque suffer like that.

–Well, he's half immortal. You don't need to worry too much.

–Immortal? He won't die?

Balot was astonished. Tweedledum laughed and returned to the side of the pool.

–He has a multidimensional body. When his body's injured in one dimension, it can be repaired from another dimension. That's the great advantage of a Living Unit. He won't die unless you blow him to pieces in all the different dimensions, or crush the nucleus of his life. He does have a life span, though.

–Life span?

–Yeah, that's the weak point of a Living Unit. All living creatures die sometime. As a matter of course. That's the first principle of this sort of unit. And that's what's so remarkable about Oeufcoque.

–What do you mean?

Balot felt startled, and she grabbed onto the ledge to steady herself. She stared at Tweedledum, feeling that the conversation was entering dangerous territory.

–Obesity.

Tweedledum's voice was curiously meek.

–Mice gain weight all through their natural lives. They grow bigger and bigger. Can't help it—something to do with their metabolism, So, even if you use longevity-enhancing procedures, as long as the weight issue remains, sooner or later they end up crushed to death by their own body mass. However much you try shunting your weight off into different dimensions, in the end you can't outsmart Mother Nature.

–A disease? And is there no cure?

–Not sure you can really call it a disease, babe. More like the inevitable course of nature. That's why, according to Oeufcoque, he first felt the need to leave this place—when he first had

his intimation of mortality*, as he put it.*

–What does that even mean?

Tweedledum stopped for a moment.

–Ah, who knows? It's not as if I'm ever even going to be leaving this place. Ask him yourself, why don't you?

Balot nodded, realizing that she'd touched on a sensitive subject. But she couldn't stop herself from asking:

–What about you—have you ever wanted to leave this place?

She regretted asking the question as soon as the words had been transmitted. Tweedledum lifted his face into the air.

–How would I live?

Balot couldn't answer. Indeed, it wasn't really a question that Tweedledum was asking—rather, he was giving an answer. It hit home sharply. But Tweedledum continued in a gentler vein.

–I have this ocean. I have peace, and I have plenty of stimulation and excitement. Maybe everything's an experiment, but there's a certain pride in knowing that my existence is, in and of itself*, at the forefront of cutting-edge research. And, above all, I have Tweedledee. Nah, babe, I can't leave here, but I also wouldn't* want *to, even if I could. But what about you, eh? Why don't you settle down here? With your Oeufcoque.*

–What, me…?

–The outside is just full of danger, right? Locking out the outside world—that's one way to ensure that life thrives.

But Balot ever so gently shook her head. She whispered back,

–I made my choice. To live outside the shell—to survive.

–I get it…

And then Tweedledum cried out for the first time. A fine, pure cry that seemed to squeeze Balot's chest tight.

–I wonder what the real ocean's like…

She heard his words just as clearly as she heard his keening cry.

–They're back, babe.

Tweedledum spoke, and Balot rested her upper body on the ledge of the pool, sensing Tweedledee coming toward them through the forest.

She thought that he was supposed to be bringing somebody with him to introduce to her, but he seemed to be on his own, carrying a boxlike object. A large one. From a distance it looked something like a birdcage.

–Hi, sorry to keep you waiting.

Soon Tweedledee was back with them, smiling.

Balot went to pull herself out of the water with both arms, but her body suddenly became stiff.

Tweedledee was indeed carrying a birdcage. Or at least something that looked just like one.

And inside it was a human head.

Tweedledee stopped walking and stood still. He was still grinning, evidently enjoying Balot's surprise.

The face inside the cage had the same expression.

"Hello, Rune-Balot. I'm the Supreme Warden of Paradise," said the face inside the birdcage. He was a man, on the old side of middle aged. His bright white hair was cleanly cropped, and he was closely shaven. His slender face was etched with deep wrinkles, but he had a refined, gentle expression. The only thing that was at all odd about him was the fact that he didn't seem to have any body parts other than his head.

"Everyone calls me Professor. Professor Faceman, that is. Quite an appropriate name for someone in my present state, don't you think? Some people go one step further and call me Facemanin-the-Cage. Which is truer still, wouldn't you say?"

Balot had forgotten about even her own nakedness and was staring at the Faceman-in-the-Cage, as he put it.

"Table!" Faceman ordered. Doing as he was told, Tweedledee interfered with—*snarced*—the ground by the poolside, and a white plane emerged, folding out to take the form of a round table.

Tweedledee placed the birdcage on the table. Then he undressed again, quickly. His role now complete, he jumped straight back into the pool without a moment's hesitation.

Faceman watched, a serene smile on his lips, and then spun around slowly in his cage to face Balot.

Balot slipped back into the pool without thinking.

"Try *snarcing* my cage. We should be able to converse."

–Yes, sir, Balot replied reflexively. Faceman laughed indulgently.

Balot felt Tweedledee splashing about behind her, but her eyes remained fixed on Faceman.

"I've taken the liberty of examining your data. Such wonderful aptitude. But if it's left unchecked, the technology you've had implanted in you is likely to have an influence on your maturity, your emotional well-being. Have you noticed yourself becoming overstressed because of this?"

Balot shook her head. Without realizing it, she was touching her throat and the surrounding area on her neck.

She was trying—not very successfully—to imagine what it would be like to have a body that didn't continue below the neckline.

"Well, it might have made you feel bad, at least. Access to all your battle data stored up inside Oeufcoque-Penteano—those were my terms for your use of the facility."

–Terms? Even as Balot spoke, she put two and two together.

–So you're healing Oeufcoque's injuries in exchange for information about me?

"Exactly. Hasn't Dr. Easter explained all this to you?"

–No, he's been too busy treating Oeufcoque…

But she wasn't about to get downhearted because of this. After all, Oeufcoque's injuries—and everything else—were her fault in the first place. She was determined to do anything to help Oeufcoque recover.

"I wonder if I could have a look at how your transplanted metal fiber is doing?"

Faceman only had to ask, and Balot was out of the pool, showing him her body.

It wasn't at all like when she used to have to do this when she was on the job. Rather, it was like receiving a medical examination from a doctor.

"You're still in puberty, I see. And so there are places where the fibers aren't fully fixed yet, in order to anticipate any future growth spurts. Splendid. A most appropriate measure. It looks like we have no worries on this front."

Balot stood still, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

"I was most impressed by the results of the analysis of your data—how tough you are. There was a time when we had to put an inordinate stress on military developments, you see. It wasn't a particularly pleasant period, but even so, we had our targets, something to work toward. Your very existence is a work of art, as far as I'm concerned. Exquisite—and tenacious. You're unique, a one and only, formed by a happy coincidence of a number of factors all falling into place—or would you rather I didn't talk about you in such terms?"

In all honesty, no, she didn't particularly like it. She'd had all sorts of unpleasant experiences since she was first treated like an object.

But then Faceman—still smiling his gentle smile—continued in a different vein, asking, "Oh, but this is rather unfair—a one-sided exchange of data. Is there anything you want to ask about me in return?"

Balot was a little perplexed. She'd never asked anyone why they were only a head before and wasn't quite sure what the correct etiquette was. In the end, she ended up asking in a roundabout way.

–Is Faceman your real name, sir?

"No, it's my nickname in the lab. My real name's Charles Ludwig. But there's no one who refers to me as such anymore—including myself. As far as I'm concerned, I'm one of my own research subjects. Although that could just be an excuse for my longevity measures, to keep myself alive for as long as possible, I suppose."

–Longevity?

"I had a few cancers gnawing away at my body, you see. The only thing to do was to get rid of it once and for all," Faceman told her, as if he were talking about a routine everyday operation. "Having said that, we probably could have saved my body using some of the technologies we developed here—but I decided that my appearance now was more appropriate for me. You see, in addition to supervising the whole of the facility, I'm in charge of a number of different research projects. Twenty bodies wouldn't be enough to withstand all the exhausting work that I'd have to put myself through. And if no body would be strong enough, I decided I'd rather have no body at all and stick to being the headquarters, literally as well as metaphorically—even if it's a bit of a strained metaphor…"

–But isn't it inconvenient?

Balot asked without really thinking, but Faceman just smiled proudly. "What do you think this cage is for? The wiring isn't just some handicraft, you know. It's cutting-edge technology that creates ideal air conditions. Every single wire filters out impurities—keeping the air inside fresh—and they also regulate the temperature and humidity. Even as we speak, subtle vibrations are flowing through the air, cleaning off my dead skin, purifying my surfaces, helping me to maintain a healthy metabolism. Far more agreeable than using your hands to clean your face with soap and water. On top of that, the two-inch-thick base of the cage has electronic interference capabilities, life-support systems, a gravity device, a hard disc with all relevant data, communications equipment, shock-absorbency devices—even self-defense mechanisms—everything you can think of, all built in."

It was quite a fluent exposition. Balot could almost imagine his chest jutting out in pride as he reeled off the list, and the incongruity made it hard for Balot to suppress a rising smile.

And then it was Faceman's turn to cast a mischievous glance at the table. She realized that he

had interfered, *snarced* it. A silver object emerged from below the table, taking the form of a pipe chair.

"Do have a seat."

Balot did as she was told. But it didn't feel like she was being ordered about. Rather, it seemed like Faceman was genuinely enjoying her company.

"I enjoy watching you—you're a walking, talking reminder of just how gifted Dr. Easter is. But…you know, there was a time when he—and everyone else at the facility—was repudiated by society. I'm sure that Dr. Easter has told you all about it…"

–"Everything turned topsy-turvy." Balot quoted the words the Doctor had once said to her.

–What exactly happened then, sir?

"The Commonwealth government placed certain *constraints* on our scientific and technological research programs. Many of our discoveries were used in the Continental War, and they were too successful—they wreaked all sorts of havoc. This inevitably had an influence on the city's decision to restrict our postwar research. The idea of using our technology on civilians was regarded with deep suspicion—prone to cause social unrest—and our experiments were declared dangerous."

–Who decided all this?

"People. Many of the people living in this city. And, with our future at stake, we at the facility decided that we needed to take drastic measures. So the Three Magi—myself included—all came up with our respective plans."

–Three Magi…?

Faceman responded to Balot's murmur with a silent smile and nod. "One of us appealed to the potential *usefulness* of the forbidden technology to society, and pushed the *Scramble 09* bill through, got the Broilerhouse to recognize it. The same law that allows you to live right now—and permits Dr. Easter and Oeufcoque their continued existences."

–You said "one of us." Which one?

"He left this world not long after the bill passed. Murdered."

Balot's eyes opened wide.

"By the hand of assassins hired by one of the other Three Magi. She suggested that the technology developed here should be made to perform a different sort of *usefulness* for society—one that met the *needs* of the city far better than *Mardock Scramble 09*. By providing pleasure and amusement, legal or illegal."

–OctoberCorp…

Faceman nodded. Balot felt that she was starting to understand why the Doctor called OctoberCorp his nemesis. The man who had given him, and Oeufcoque, their *raison d'être*—he'd been murdered by them.

–But how did the quarrel ever get that far? You used to be friends, right?

"The dispute started over differences in thought as to what constituted *usefulness* for society. This wasn't your ordinary laboratory debate; each one of us ended up staking our very existences on our views. In particular, it was inevitable that the *Scramble 09* faction—with its insistence on legal validity at all costs—would end up clashing with OctoberCorp, with its 'don't ask, don't tell' approach to law. They were now both in a dilemma, forced to fight each other for the right to survive, whether they wanted to or not. Even now, although the influence of the Three Magi has

long since waned, the protégés continue the struggle wherever they can."

–Is the person who founded OctoberCorp still alive?

"She's alive. She's nominally still the director of OctoberCorp. But her condition isn't so different from mine. She's completely paralyzed, apparently, with only a portion of her brain still functioning.

–And what about the last of the Three Magi?

Balot barely dared ask. But Faceman just smiled as calmly as ever and said, "The last of the Three Magi put forward the solution that was most favored by society, by the people of Mardock City. That is to say, complete isolation of all research."

–Isolation?

"That's right. A total blockade. All research and trials to be completed within the facility and then kept here. Our data never leave the facility. The civil authorities accept us—with strings attached, of course—and even provide funding so that we can continue."

–Staying here, forever?

"That's right. This is the eternal Inner Courtyard. We call ourselves scientists, but really we're wild beasts who've voluntarily chosen to enter a cage—as a condition of our continued survival." Faceman laughed from within his birdcage. "Paradise doesn't turn away visitors from the outside world. But whenever a visitor comes, it has to be under a strict set of conditions. Break those conditions and it's punishable under Commonwealth law. And the most important condition of all is…no unauthorized use of this equipment here to try and contact the outside world. Violating this condition is a felony."

Balot digested these words.

Faceman's gray eyes were fixed on Balot. He had evidently given his reply to Balot's request to use the computer terminal that was this pool.

But there had to be more to his reply—a qualification. Balot was convinced of this.

–But I think that the Doctor wants me to use this thing.

"Yes, and we've already received his proposal, Rune-Balot. If truth be told, I'm deeply interested in seeing just how good you are at utilizing this Parallel Transmission Core." So saying, he glanced at the pool and whispered, "It's down to *Scramble 09*."

As ever, as if this phrase held all the answers.

"The moment you use this Transmission Core is the moment you become a suspect for premeditated criminal conduct against the Commonwealth. But if we can prove that your actions are in no way criminal but rather a measure to preserve your life, then we should be able to dispel that suspicion."

–I understand.

"But there's no reason to put you at any sort of further risk. You're the Concerned Party in this case, and you should leave it all to Dr. Easter and Oeufcoque to solve."

–I just feel that if I don't do something myself, I'll end up getting killed.

"Not if you remain here." Faceman spoke in a voice so gentle that it was almost cruel. "This place is a true closed environment—far safer and more pleasant than any prison."

Balot nodded repeatedly. She understood Faceman's thoughts, his ideology. But it wasn't what she wanted, not from the Doctor or Oeufcoque.

–Oeufcoque told me that he'd think about what it meant to live together, with me.

"By 'live together,' I'm assuming that you're referring to how you adapt to society? Well, whether you choose the *Mardock Scramble 09* path or the OctoberCorp path, you're still throwing yourself into the diseased core of society. After all, a civilian with fancy technology is still a civilian…"

–Oeufcoque and the Doctor saved my life, Balot answered back, pressing her case.

–I think that I can change. Because of those people.

"Yes, but it won't be more than a partial change—a personal transformation, if you like. What humanity needs is fundamental reform. Paradise may be closed off to the masses at the moment, but I firmly believe that one day it will be the model for all mankind. The world will join us in Paradise. This place is the pinnacle of technology and ideology, after all."

Balot was silent. She had never thought about the world in quite such terms before.

"There's something that Oeufcoque once said to me. That he would die one day. And in realizing this fact, he had felt a sense of *identity* for the first time—the thing that psychologists call the ego. That's why he needed to do something. The budding sprouts of self-fulfillment—it wouldn't have been fair for anyone to try and stop him," Faceman said in a soft tone. "But we… we're like actors who haven't learned their lines yet—who don't even have a script. In our harsh reality, improvisation is the order of the day. We don't know how the plot is meant to unfold, and there's no director standing in the wings ready to prompt us. We're just thrown straight on stage and left to get on with it—and this is what we're told. Live. Until you die. That's the wild for you. We may be social creatures, but we're still wild animals. But we don't have to live lives of improvisation forever. We need a world that frees people from the pressure of constantly having to improvise. A world like this one, Paradise. *That* is what it means to be civilized."

Then he looked straight at Balot with his gentle eyes. "In time, as your body starts to mature, your natural aptitude for your abilities will have a strong influence on your mental development. It could even drive you to the brink of madness. If that happens, will society as we know it be there to save you?"

Balot pondered this question for a moment. Her answer came to her much quicker than she had expected.

–At the beginning I was so scared of becoming the Concerned Party for this case. Now, though, it feels like the right decision, and I'm glad I made it. Society might not be able to rescue me. But it did at least show me that there was such a thing as a path to salvation.

"As the victim in the case? You fight in order to request permission from society for your own existence?"

Balot nodded and then shook her head a split second later, as if to contradict herself. Both were her true feelings.

–I used to be a victim, an object. I was always under the influence of some exterior force. Of someone or something. And, in the end, I was killed for it. But fortunately I was brought back and became a survival case. So if I'm offered the opportunity to help with some other case, one with nothing to do with Shell or OctoberCorp, to be the one to solve it, then I'd like to take it.

Faceman smiled benignly, as if he were a priest listening to confession from one of his flock. "So, you're prepared to be in the same position as Oeufcoque and the Doctor, are you? You know that if you fail to solve your cases, your very existence is likely to be seen as a threat to society?"

–I understand, sir.

"Very well, then. As long as we get our valuable samples of your precious data, you go ahead and swim anywhere you like within the pool. We will just sit and observe your criminal acts."

–Yes, sir.

"Tweedledum should brief you on how to use the Transmission Core."

–Thank you very much.

Balot was genuinely grateful. She realized that the bargain that she'd just struck was a big one, with her own life at stake. Curiously, though, she felt neither fear nor agitation. All she could think was that she had done the obvious thing.

Suddenly there was the sensation of another person approaching the pool.

Dr. Easter approached, combing his tie-dyed hair upward.

He had the impatient look of someone waiting for a conversation to come to an end.

"Ah, Dr. Easter. I've just been listening to the valuable opinions of your client."

"Professor…we're most grateful for your cooperation."

"Will you sojourn here for long, do you think?"

"Sadly, we have work to be getting back to…"

"Important work, no doubt?"

"Yes."

The Doctor then turned to Balot. "I've finished my maintenance work on Oeufcoque."

Balot searched for something to *snarc* so that she could reply, but while she was looking the Doctor carried on. "So, it looks like the Professor has put you in the picture?"

Balot nodded.

Faceman smiled. "She seems to have made up her mind to taste of the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Dr. Easter."

The Doctor was a little hesitant now. "I don't want you to end up as an outlaw from the Commonwealth, of course. Your use of the Transmission Core will be under my name. All you need to do is work on finding Shell's weak spot, whatever it is."

–That's fine. I want you to show me how you guys do battle, Balot answered, as Faceman permitted her to speak through his cage.

And then Balot realized for the first time that she was fully naked.

In a fluster, she scrabbled around for her clothes, but they were nowhere to be seen, and the Doctor took off his gown and placed it over her shoulders.

Faceman whispered, "And the eyes of Eve were opened, and she knew that she was naked."

04

Eden and Sodom both at once: such was the night view of the postwar boomtown that spread out across the base of the rolling hills on the North Side of Mardock City.

It was a glittering pleasure garden to the peace activists, and the media folk and the materialistic youths—known collectively as the postwar generation—and it was vice personified for the war generation to whom having a son in the navy was the ultimate, most glorious social virtue.

Rich and poor alike poured into the city from the provinces, even from the Commonwealth's capital city seventy miles to the north, all aiming for this little region on the slopes, seeking work or pleasure.

The skyscraper hotels that stood halfway up the hills epitomized the thriving prosperity of the postwar years, and at the same time seemed to lord it over the regions below.

Inside one of the hotel rooms was Boiled. A room equivalent to economy class in a passenger plane. From the fortieth floor down were lots of single rooms filled with people who looked after the needs of guests staying on the more luxurious upper floors.

It was in one such room that Boiled was taking a shower, washing himself from his head down, watching blood sluice off his body and down the drain.

The back of his right hand was peppered with holes and spilling blood. Bullets had pierced his hand cleanly and come out the other side, unlike the bullets in his arm that were now lodged inside him. He placed his mouth to the area of skin around his wounds and sucked the blood out. Along with the blood came a hard object.

He spat the hard thing out in the bathtub. A bullet. He rinsed his blood-soaked mouth out with water from the shower. Squashed bullets and fragments of steel rolled across the bottom of the bathtub.

There was a toilet next to the bathtub, and on top of the cistern were a butter knife and fork from the room, both covered in blood, trailing red lines across the white porcelain.

Boiled had used these to pry shrapnel from of his body.

Boiled closed his eyes and flexed his muscles one by one, to check that they were all still working properly.

After a while, he slowly opened his eyes, picking up each metal fragment one by one, then he turned the shower off and got out of the bathtub and stood in front of the sink.

The fogged-up mirror showed a faint reflection of his body—a rippling torso of living, breathing iron. There were also a number of wounds in his chest and stomach.

Boiled placed every last fragment of steel in the trash can, patted his wounds down with a towel, and applied antiseptic lotion before taking some pills that promoted accelerated skin growth. He applied gauze to the open wounds and wrapped himself in bandages and dressings as necessary. No blood seeped out anymore. The wounds were, once again, just wounds. Nothing to worry about.

He exited the bathroom, dried himself off, and put his clothes on. He strapped a holster to his side, picking up his gun in his hands. He passed it back from left to right a number of times, double-checked that it was fully loaded with bullets, then slid the revolver away in its holster.

He strapped his wristwatch on and had his special-order jacket in his hands when the telephone rang.

He lifted the receiver.

–Boiled?

Shell's voice.

"Speaking."

–Come up to my room, will you? There's something I want to show you.

He sounded happy. There was laughter in the background. The melodious voice of a woman.

"I'll be right there." Boiled put the phone down, left the room, and boarded an elevator. The buttons on the inside panel ran only as far as the fortieth floor, and Boiled took out a card from his pocket and slotted it into the space below the panel.

The display light for the sixty-sixth floor appeared automatically, and the elevator ascended.

When he stepped out of the elevator, Boiled was confronted with a scene far removed from the previous one.

The corridors were wide, decorated in shades of blue. The carpet was plush and soft, dampening any footfall to near silence.

The crystal chandeliers twinkled, giving off a fine light that seemed to blend seamlessly into the clean air.

The walls were dotted with paintings—valuable enough that there would have been plenty of people glad even for just their frames.

Boiled stood in front of the door he'd come for. He knocked using the brass knocker—antique, *analog*, no cheap digital electronic intercom here—and the door opened immediately to reveal Shell in a smart suit.

"Come in, Boiled!" He smiled sharply and beckoned for Boiled to enter.

A pleasant voice bubbled forth from the adjoining room.

"Over here! Come and have a look at this!"

They entered the bedroom, where a girl was bouncing up and down on a double bed, giggling. She looked to be about twenty. Her blonde hair had probably been arranged neatly at some point in the evening, but now it was straggled across her face.

The woman saw the two entering and stopped laughing. Standing on top of the bed, she cried out—*Ah!*—in a loud voice, as if to tell them something. Watching this, Shell burst into a low chuckle himself.

"A proper airhead," he said, and sat down on the sofa. "Let me introduce you. This is Ms. Octavia, aka Ms. Eyes Wide Shut—the hidden shame of a famous family. She's the daughter of one of OctoberCorp's directors, but she's not quite up to the task… In other words, she's defective goods and won't ever find a buyer. Her existence was supposed to have been top secret, but I discovered her and let the cat out of the bag, and now I get to keep her."

The girl shouted something through her laughter. It could have been the name of a TV show, or some snacks that she wanted, or even a person's name—neither Shell nor Boiled had any idea what she had just said or what she wanted.

"She's the physical embodiment of my business plan. I borrowed her for about half an hour so that you could see her face. My glorious wife!"

"When's the ceremony?" asked Boiled.

"We sign contracts at the end of the month. It would have been earlier too, if it hadn't been for

that pesky trial."

Then Shell's tone of voice changed, just as when a comedian suddenly turned to a serious part of his set. "By the way, Boiled—on another matter, I seem to remember I'd asked you to take care of a little business for me."

Eyes still fixed on the girl, Boiled answered softly. "There was more to it than I imagined."

"More than you imagined? How?" asked Shell.

"They're using every trick up their sleeve to obstruct us. They've fortified their client; she's battle-ready. We should now think of her as another member of the opposition, not just as a civilian."

"What does all that mean?"

"She's now a competent adversary," said Boiled.

"You make it sound like you've been in a war!"

"Not that far off, actually."

Boiled turned from the girl to Shell. Shell's expression had changed completely.

"Well, then, let's have some battlefield reports from the mighty Mr. Boiled!" Shell's eyes were tinged with a harsh light.

"I wounded an opposition PI. I know where he's being treated. I'll be heading there shortly."

"Marvelous. You'll be the nuclear warhead that blasts them to pieces. And you'll also tidy up the mushroom cloud and the black rain that falls afterwards, right?"

"Except there's one thing that's somewhat unusual."

"*Unusual*? Give it a break," Shell waved his hand dismissively, but behind his angry face there was a glimpse of a different emotion peeking through. "Everything's unusual these days. The girl that should have died in my dreams is alive, accusing me of crimes that I can't even remember committing. I'm in the middle of a huge deal and I'm being held back. And? Has the girl decided to leave me alone in order to run for office, because she needs to focus on her campaign for president of the Commonwealth or something?"

"There was an unusual petition filed at the Broilerhouse."

"Ach, there's always something unusual down there in the amazing world of the Broilerhouse. *Unusual* petitions are probably more common than *usual* ones down there."

"Blank sheets of paper have been submitted as the indictment sheets for the next trial," said Boiled.

"Their usual trick of not publishing the charges until the last minute in order to throw us off, right?" asked Shell.

"If it's just a bluff then all's well and good. But there's a possibility that they're in the middle of a new investigation now, even as we speak."

Shell stopped in his tracks, and his expression was wiped off his face.

"I don't know how they're managing it exactly, but it's not impossible that the opposition is looking for the *key* to your impending big deal," Boiled informed him in a whisper.

Shell's eyes started shining even more fiercely.

"So, Mr. Shell, where exactly is the key?" asked Boiled.

"You don't need to know that." Shell's expression was grim, but there was a wobble in his voice.

Their conversation was interrupted by a shrill shriek of pleasure. The girl seemed to be delighted by Shell's fear.

"Shut up!" Shell cried. But the girl wouldn't stop laughing.

"I…I can turn into a new person whenever I want. *That's* my big deal. My past is just…" Shell glared at the woman on the bed, suppressing his own agitation. "I've already forgotten what the girl's face looked like even."

Slowly, he turned around to look at Boiled. His eyes were bloodshot and shone abnormally bright.

"Such a little girl—why can't you just wring her neck, then snap it off for me in the bargain? Haven't I given you enough money? Are you trying to muscle in on my deal that I have lined up? Is that it?"

"You're talking nonsense, Mr. Shell. Try and calm down."

"Kill her!" Shell was screaming now, just as shrill as the girl on the bed. "Kill that bitch who dares to try and pursue me!"

His words tailed off into a shriek, and he collapsed onto a sofa, shaking his head and trying to calm himself down.

"You know what you need to do, right? It's simple enough. Right? You need to take that gun in your pocket and pump its contents right into the girl."

Boiled nodded, silent.

"Why should I have to…that girl…always… Why…why am scared? What am I scared *of*? What is there about *that girl* that should frighten me so?" Shell was mumbling to himself now, half delirious.

Boiled didn't know either. The memories that held the answer to these questions had been sucked cleanly out of Shell's mind and hidden in a secret location.

Boiled looked at the woman on the bed again. *There's something I want to show you,* he had said. In other words, Shell was frightened. Frightened of nothing more than a woman.

"A woman, again…" Boiled murmured in a voice too quiet for Shell to hear. There was always a woman involved behind the scenes of all Shell's transactions. And now, this woman that was right in front of their eyes seemed to know what Shell was running from and how far he was likely to fall as a result.

The woman continued to laugh. She was enjoying herself.

≡

Boiled left Shell's room and headed straight for the parking lot in the hotel basement.

He headed for a blue gasoline-fueled car. The windows were tinted, stopping outsiders from seeing in. He opened the door to the driver's seat and heard a click. The trigger of a gun being pulled back. But it was more of a courtesy action than anything else.

Not even bothering to look at the passenger seat, Boiled sat down in the driver's seat and closed the door behind him.

"How's it going, boss?" Medium asked in a hoarse voice as he returned the firing hammer back into place.

"Fine." Boiled stuck his keys in the ignition as he answered. Medium's face was covered in creases.

"How's your condition?"

"Fine and dandy, thanks for asking, boss."

Two red lights flickered in Medium's eyes, visible behind his sunglasses.

His face was covered in patches of slightly different colors. His hair was neatly shaved, and his shining head also revealed the odd patch of unusual coloring. One side of his head still had stitches in and was covered with layer upon layer of translucent antibacterial tape.

"What happened to your injured fingers?"

"Here." Medium lifted his left hand, now covered in a black glove. He balled his hand into a fist, and there was a grating noise. "Makeshift electronic parts—but they should stand up okay in battle. We don't really have the time for me to leisurely transplant a new set, do we? So, unleash me whenever you're ready!" Medium bared his teeth. His breathing was rough, and his knees were shaking restlessly. He was just like a dog drooling in anticipation of feeding time.

"Are you on drugs?" Boiled asked.

"Just some stimulants. The aftereffects of the electricity are so bad that I can hardly use my hands and feet when I'm sober. Don't worry, I'm used to using them. I'm not about to go flying off the handle. Anyway, more importantly, have a look at this." Medium took a PDA-style monitor out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Boiled.

The monitor displayed a map centered around the city, with a red line showing the wake of a boat.

"This is Flesh's legacy. Using his hacking routes, we've managed to penetrate both Air Traffic Control and the Broilerhouse, just as you requested. It wasn't strong enough to track that flying egg or tell us where it landed, though."

"We have enough for now." Boiled folded the monitor up and returned it to Medium.

"There's one region where boats seem to cross paths a number of times, with overlapping wakes. The route that the Broilerhouse uses."

"You know their whereabouts?" asked Medium.

"The outskirts of the city. It'll be a while. Get some sleep. Staying high for too long ruins your stamina," said Boiled.

"I'll be okay. I'm so looking forward to meeting that little kitten again that I'll go anywhere. Just say the word. Where do you want me to attack?"

Boiled turned the key in the ignition. "Paradise."

The engine roared to life, and Medium whooped with joy.

≡

They entered the trunk road from the northwest of Mardock City, and Medium took some capsules, prompting Boiled to murmur, without any emotion, "Heroic Pills…"

"Yeah, we're not talking about the adulterated crap you get in Times Square, though. This is the real thing, pure and unspoiled. Will you try one too, boss?"

Boiled was about to shake his head to say no, but then he stopped himself mid-action.

"Just the one." Boiled stuck his hand out. Grinning, Medium dropped a single capsule into Boiled's massive palm.

Boiled swallowed it, and Medium asked, "How is it?"

"Not much difference."

"It'll kick in soon, and you'll start to feel happy."

"The back of my head is starting to feel itchy," said Boiled. Medium was visibly disappointed. "Boss…why did you try one if you're not in the mood?"

"I have a client who's addicted, and I wanted to understand the effects for myself. But it looks like that's beyond me."

"It certainly seems that Welldone was right about you, boss—you're a proper hunting dog. You'll do whatever it takes to catch your prey. I could wish for a bit more of a sense of humor, though."

Boiled made no effort to respond. Instead, he said, "We're heading to the Broilerhouse now, in order to check a few things out with night duty."

"Roger that, boss. Shall I drive for a while?"

"No need. You rest your body," said Boiled.

"Still, you're holding up well, considering you don't take any drugs. When exactly do you get a chance to go to bed?"

"I've forgotten how to sleep," said Boiled.

Medium grinned. "Good one, boss. Glad to see you've got a sense of humor after all."

"I haven't slept for nine years."

"That's the spirit, Mr. Iron Man. Although you'll need to work on your facial expression—it's still a bit dour," said Medium.

Without another word, Boiled stopped off at a motel they were passing by and, out of Medium's earshot, contacted the Broilerhouse using a dedicated line.

Boiled climbed back into the car and was just about to turn the key again when he stayed his hand for a moment, thinking.

He was thinking about the last time he'd slept—had he dreamt anything then?

The answer was *no*.

Boiled started the car and drove off.

Chapter 6

INJECTION

–It's a hit! There are about a hundred Shells in Mardock City, but this is definitely our man. There's a casino called Eggnog Blue owned by one of OctoberCorp's holding companies. He's the director in charge there.

Tweedledum spoke and Balot nodded as she retrieved data from the pool.

Bubbles leaked from Balot's mouth, heading to the surface.

She was swimming in the computer terminal pool, breathing through a set of EasyGills.

The EasyGills were made in Paradise, of course.

The Doctor, Faceman, and Tweedledee all watched from the side of the pool, keeping a lookout for Balot.

–Good stuff—you've got the gist, now try accessing a little deeper. Try not to get distracted by all the electronic noise. Think semantics*—you need to* commune *with the computer, not just connect.*

Underwater, eyes closed, stark naked, Balot stretched out her arms and legs and used her entire being to *converse* with the computer. Millions of data channels opened up, and she focused on the semantics—the nuances of how everything interrelated, how the channels developed, and what this all meant. This then led her on to search for data directly, floating through the various data systems of the city. What did Shell do, when, where? What did Shell touch, what did he buy, who was he with, what sort of activity was he involved in—all was being calculated at cutthroat velocity.

–What an amazing machine…

Balot was full of wonder as she swam in the pool of data. It was like when she had looked up her own citizen's ID with Oeufcoque—only incomparably faster and vaster in scope.

It was as if she were excavating, like they were fossils, the footprints of a man called Shell, scouring the whole of Mardock City, discarding the ephemera like so much dirt and gradually piecing together the skeletal remains of a giant dinosaur.

The computer was constantly calculating the patterns of information, piecing together the implications of Shell's various actions in order to try and work out what he was doing, discarding the impossibilities one by one in order to establish what the most likely—or least improbable—implications were.

–So much of the data is contradictory or inconsistent. It looks like they've been constantly updated—or rather better to say falsified. It's a bit like a half-assed software update rushed to market far sooner than it should have been with nowhere near enough time to iron out the bugs just to save a few bucks.

Tweedledum was happy to comment and advise but wasn't lending a hand himself.

Neither did Balot try and force him to help her. Only one of them needed to violate Commonwealth law.

–He has all these memory defects listed. That's a common thread; it's coming up again and again. And someone seems to have fiddled around with the university hospital's neuroscience department. Its research data has been manipulated by outside sources.

–They're probably trying to hide something by erasing it. But erased data always leaves a

hole, babe. Why not have a poke around to see just how deep that hole is?

–Sure.

The countless streams of data whirling around her looked like rays of sunlight, pouring in and piling on top of each other. Balot used her arms and legs to push herself farther underwater and then turned, face up, to caress the rays of information one by one.

≡

"Amazing…to be able to bend all that information to her will…" Faceman's voice dripped with pure admiration.

–She's dancing. Looks like fun.

Tweedledee held his knees together at the side of the pool, looking somewhat bored.

The Doctor stared at the pool with a tense expression fixed on his face.

Just then, Faceman's expression changed suddenly.

"Phew," he sighed, staring into space in apparent wonderment.

"What is it, Professor?" asked the Doctor.

"Ho hum. Looks like someone's come in search of Paradise. The checkpoint at the bottom of the hill confirmed that there's a vehicle drawing near. Two passengers, one of them a PI and Trustee of a case. He's lodged a request through official Broilerhouse channels to be allowed to pay a visit to Paradise."

The Doctor's face turned blue. "Not Boiled?"

Faceman watched the Doctor, amused. "Looks like the Rusty Gun has come to spread some fire around. What to do…?"

"It'd be deeply disadvantageous to Paradise if it's revealed that Rune-Balot is here," the Doctor responded hastily, desperately, but Faceman's only response was to laugh.

"Dr. Easter, you seem to be a little too familiar with society's squabbles for my liking. But yes, you are indeed right. And I have no intention of allowing our data collection efforts on Rune-Balot to be interrupted before we've finished harvesting what we need. Very well—I take personal responsibility for the reception of callers to the gates of Paradise. Tweedledee."

Tweedledee, summoned without warning, turned to Faceman with a jolt.

"It looks like some rough customers are on their way here. Will you help me welcome them?"

–Does that mean I have permission to interact with outsiders?

"Indeed. A rare opportunity."

"Professor…are you planning on leaving it to Tweedledee?" asked the Doctor.

The Tweedledee in question answered.

–No worries. I've read up on what to do when contact is made with outsiders. I'm looking forward to it.

"Dr. Easter. Why don't you use this opportunity to prepare your next course of action. It looks like Rune-Balot's activities down there are going to take a little while yet."

The Doctor nodded calmly, but his countenance betrayed his nerves as he hurried back into the jungle, taking the same route he'd taken to get there.

–What do you think Dr. Easter plans to do?

"He'll take Oeufcoque into the Humpty-Dumpty that he has standing by on the roof. Then, as soon as Balot finishes her work here, they'll all be heading off."

–Oh, they're leaving?

Tweedledee's mouth went a little sour.

–Will they be back anytime soon?

"Let's just say that I pray that one day the girl—and indeed all of society—will understand just how positive an influence our work can be." Faceman spoke in an uncharacteristically subdued tone as he made his cage float up into the air. "Now, let's go and see to our visitors."

≡

Boiled stared out the window with half-closed, emotionless eyes, taking in the night lights.

–The contract's confirmed.

Shell's voice—along with a trace of static—on Boiled's cell phone.

–Well, we've only just published the marriage banns, but as soon as my transaction is complete we'll move on to the actual nuptial contract.

Boiled listened to his employer's report without seeming particularly interested.

Next to him Medium's shoulders were shaking. He was struggling to suppress laughter.

–It's all going smoothly now. Whatever happens at the Broilerhouse, it's going to be too late to affect anything.

"Do you have a fixed time and date for the contract yet?"

–It'll all be sorted out within the hour. There's a mound of official paperwork the height of a thick steak still to get through. Steak is right, actually—you could say we're all playing for high stakes. Except that I'm going to be helping myself to the best pickings. After it's all over I'm comping the girl's father in my hotel. I'll pile him high with zero-interest chips and make sure he enjoys himself good and proper, on the house.

"This is a personal matter for him, then?"

–He's on the board of OctoberCorp, so… I'm sure he'll have a dozen wine-swilling legal advisors lined up in a limo somewhere, but it doesn't bother me. Her family name is about as prestigious as it comes, and it's going to be my lucky star. You know her dad, right? Cleanwill John October.

Shell enunciated every syllable of the name.

–And he lives up to his name—he's a clean-living john. A john as in a sucker, mark, or maybe even a john who likes his whores. Either way, John's a john, pure and simple.

"What about the girl?"

–I'll leave her in the hotel for now. Sooner or later she'll become my official property, of course, so I'll need to start thinking about a storage space for her. I'll keep her locked away in a pretty little jewel box of a place, somewhere.

"I'll proceed according to schedule. I'll send you a report on the outcome sometime between midnight and dawn."

–Night mail, then. I'm counting on you. Make sure that your night mail is good enough to banish my nightmares forever. Make the girl, the one that should have already disappeared a

long time ago, disappear for good.

"Understood." Boiled cut the phone line. Next to him, Medium burst out laughing.

"I have no idea what you were just talking about, but there's one thing that I'm sure of." Medium pushed his sunglasses up and glanced at Boiled. "Your client's totally crazy."

"None of your business."

"Hey, I don't mean it in a bad way. He's about as crazy as us, I mean. A good client to have. A true fetishist's assignment. That makes me happy."

Boiled didn't answer. He slipped the cell phone back in his jacket pocket before changing the subject. "Earlier this morning I put in a request for a coworker on this case, as a witness. That's you."

"Ha…so I'm a PI, now?"

"A PI's assistant. The target, the girl, has a similar request in."

Medium's face twisted into an ugly sneer. "I get it. So we can kill her fair and square now, right? All above board and within the law. Brilliant. I'll kill her all right. I'll kill her *good* and use up all her parts. Until I'm satisfied. That's the agreement, right?"

Boiled nodded.

"I can't wait." Medium's face lit up in an instant, and he stared out at the long, meandering road in front of him.

Greenery was all around them—a result of the plant farms that had been set up in the area, the loam impregnated with concrete-dissolving enzymes. All kinds of trees were there, and in the gaps, buildings that hadn't yet been completely destroyed—a sort of graveyard for a city.

"The reforestation program for the area bombed out by the war—a Band-Aid for a city, don't you think? About as much good as a couple of Band-Aids after you've been shot up by a machine gun, I mean…" Medium's eyes glinted red, and a twisted smile flittered across his mouth. "If I remember rightly, a number of unmanned fighter planes were shot down in this area. The ones that the military-capitalist Continentals started sending over toward the end of the war, remote-controlled to cross the sea automatically and release their payload. According to rumor, there was some sort of military facility here. Why would our little kitty-cat be in a place like this?"

"She's already on another road leading into the grounds."

"Grounds? Of what?" Medium asked.

"The experimental facility. There was a time when the army and the government poured funding into it."

And then it emerged. A structure made of bright metal and glass—very different from all the abandoned buildings in the vicinity—could be seen in between the darkness of the forest nightscape. It was so large that it was hard to tell at first glance what sort of construction it was. Something vast and white, almost like an endless wall, surrounded it.

"All the mountains…" Medium was struck dumb for a moment, then slapped his knees like a child enthralled by the television. "And here's Noah's Ark! What a surprise. So, this is where she's hiding out. The little kitten's rolled up in a ball, purring away as she sleeps? I'll *purr you*, my little kitty-cat. I'll *purr you* all right."

Boiled's sleepy eyes were trained on the rolling hills in front of him.

Mardock City was originally a trade port and an engineer's city.

The city developed, went high-tech, survived a war, and its prosperity was now firmly secured on the holy trinity of the industrial district, research institutions, and the harbor.

Now, farther into the city, there was also an inverted triangle—an unholy trinity—of the city council, the pleasure district, and the media center.

Each of the two triangles were in turn subdivided into smaller sections, like a dart board, where wealth, poverty, glory, depravity, and fame all sat jostling cheek by jowl.

Boiled parked his car at the top of the slope. Medium opened the door and said, blood rising to his face, "Unleash me whenever you're ready, boss," as he looked at Boiled, who had emerged from the other door.

Boiled pointed toward one of the slopes. "Head in from the west. There should be security firm personnel stationed there. Gather any intelligence on the facility you can."

"Shall I report back to you with my location?" asked Medium.

"If possible then do. I'll be heading to the main entrance and gain access based on official procedures."

"You mean they'll try and keep her hidden? Say that she's not in and never has been, that sort of thing?"

"Exactly."

"In other words, then…" Medium spread his arms out, no longer able to contain his joy. "I can do whatever I like to the girl, seeing that she's not supposed to be there anyway."

"Anything goes. Now move on in," said Boiled.

Medium spun around.

His brutal smile seemed to linger on, like incense in the air.

The hound dog, unleashed, went running off into the woods.

Once he had disappeared completely, Boiled moved back into the driver's seat.

"An ark…" he murmured, gripping the wheel. "An ark that waits for the deluge that never comes."

Muttering to himself, he drove off.

02

Boiled flashed his PI's license at the guard who appeared in the watchtower monitor in the middle of the revolving gate.

The guard noted his license without emotion, as if he too were part of the machine.

–You will be connected to the warden shortly, sir. Kindly wait there. Your voice and image are being recorded.

Boiled nodded. The screen on the monitor changed.

–So, the Rusty Gun has returned for maintenance, unable to cope with the poisonous rust that he produces?

On the monitor, a man in late middle age. Only his neck upward was visible. Boiled knew all too well what had happened below the neckline.

"Oeufcoque should be here, Professor."

The man on the screen—Professor Faceman—laughed quietly.

–I say, this is rather off-topic from your official request. Is there nothing else you want to ask me?

He spoke as an indulgent teacher might gently encourage a pupil to revise his answer.

"There's a possibility that a material witness for a case is hiding in this facility. I need you to open the gate for me."

–There's no need to force your way in using a gun. Come over to the November Forest.

Even as he faded from the monitor, Faceman's tone was gentle.

Boiled stopped the car and headed for the white wall of chalk, placing his hand on a small door that was etched into the wall.

The door gave a little electronic buzz and opened inward.

He stepped into a long, dazzlingly white corridor, and the door shut behind him.

Everything around him was a clear white, and it radiated calmness, like a first-class airport lounge.

Boiled walked on. Calm footfalls—this was a place he was comfortable with, at home. It was as if his body wanted these homely, nostalgic feelings in spite of himself, in spite of his resistance and disgust toward the very idea.

Boiled continued down the corridor and arrived at the end without passing a soul. He came to a giant wall again. He touched the electronic pad on the wall, and the thick walls parted to either side to reveal trees and plants not dissimilar to the ones on the outside.

Boiled entered the forest.

There was a white table and chairs in a clearing surrounded by white birch trees. A young man stood by the table, and he smiled as Boiled drew near. Or so it seemed, but then the young man's expression turned sour.

"I took my telecom out of my head a long time ago. No use in *snarcing* me to communicate, Tweedledee," Boiled said.

Tweedledee looked more disappointed than anything else. He jerked his chin toward the table.

There was a cup on the table, and the aroma of warm coffee drifted about the glade.

Tweedledee signaled with his eyes that the coffee had been prepared specially for Boiled.

Boiled ignored it and stood in front of the table. “Professor Faceman.”

The old man’s head on the other side of the coffee—Faceman—raised his eyes from within his cage. “This forest is where many a war-weary soldier came to recuperate—and it’s also the final resting place for many. When you finally return, it should be to here.”

Boiled shook his head slowly. “I came here ten years ago because I was ordered to by the army. Now that the war’s over I have no intention of becoming a victim of your experiments.”

“So that’s your postwar experience, is it? Many soldiers still drag around a victim complex with them. How about you?”

“I’m neither the victim nor the perpetrator,” said Boiled.

Tweedledee looked blankly on.

The conversation was going straight over his head.

Faceman turned to Tweedledee and smiled. “We won’t be needing you here any longer, Tweedledee. Why not head over to the West Forest?”

Tweedledee shrugged his shoulders and approached Boiled, then tapped on the man’s burly arms. Playfully, pleading. Then he disappeared deep into the forest.

“The only care he has in the world is that there are no *active* subjects around, so to speak.” Faceman watched Tweedledee’s back as he departed, then looked up at Boiled. “He was delighted about the fact that he thought he could get to know the new girl, though.”

Without changing his expression, Boiled dipped his hand into his jacket pocket and spoke. “I have three questions. Number one, where are Oeufcoque, his client, and Dr. Easter? If they are here, I need you to tell me where you are sheltering them.”

“We don’t *shelter* anyone here. We receive them as guests,” said Faceman.

“They’re here, then?”

“I believe I have the right of refusal when it comes to answering questions?”

“The right, perhaps, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that you get to exercise that right,” said Boiled.

“Hmm. What are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting that this diseased facility, steeped in lies as it is, may soon be coming to terms with the reality of your death.”

Faceman just smiled gently. “So, death is your only true reality. How like you. Not that humans are capable of simultaneously experiencing alternative realities—but killing me isn’t going to change anything. Nor do I think that taking my life is going to be of much use to you. Unless that’s what you’re looking for, and it will give you closure? Is that how you feel right now?”

Boiled slowly drew his hand out of his chest pocket.

But he wasn’t wielding a gun. Instead, he let his arm flop down and started speaking again. “There’s another person of interest in this case who has already penetrated the facility.”

“I presume you mean the oil-soaked man who’s currently trying to gain access from the loading dock in the western ward? I see—if I don’t answer your questions then he goes off on a little destructive rampage, is that it? And this is how you choose to make yourself useful to society?” Faceman asked with absolute serenity.

Boiled replied, “I’m the only one endowed with the right to arrest him as a suspect and material witness. The paperwork has all been approved by the Broilerhouse already.”

Faceman furrowed his brow as if he were troubled by something. “Does your accomplice, who’s trying his best to invade the facility as we speak, know any of this? No, we’re talking about

you. I'm sure you've told him the exact opposite."

"Only as a means to efficiently ensure that he's as useful as possible. A tactic used often in the army—or this facility."

"There are means that are justified by the ends, and there are means that aren't," replied Faceman.

"I have no time for—or interest in—your moral lectures."

Faceman sighed and spoke in a persuasive tone of voice that was also a warning. "Here at the facility we are constantly updating, examining, and refining our technology. All we did was permit Dr. Easter a loan of some of our facilities in exchange for the latest set of data he has on his civilian subjects."

"So you admit to harboring a material witness?"

"It's your choice to interpret my words however you choose," said Faceman.

Boiled nodded. "Now, my second question." He stared at Faceman with absolute indifference.

"Wait a moment. I'll answer your questions, but in return I'd like you to sit down. You're not positioned well, and I can't see you properly."

Boiled moved his chin from left to right. Not to respond, but to interrupt. "I need you to answer my question."

"Hmm?"

"We will take custody of the data that Dr. Easter submitted to you."

"You can't really call that a question. In any case, what do you want that girl's data for?"

"It could turn out to be a crucial courtroom exhibit."

"Highly unlikely. Dear, dear. First Tweedledee, now you…" Boiled's eyebrows tightened. Faceman continued, "Tweedledee wants access to the girl's data too. Of course, I'm forbidding all access to it on the basis that I and a select group of researchers need exclusive access to it at the moment. And you're just like Tweedledee."

"What are you trying to say?" asked Boiled.

"It seems like you might be looking for a partner, just as Tweedledee is."

Boiled stared at Faceman with a sharp glint in his eye. "The technology in Paradise only begets monsters. All that's happened is that we have another walking, talking exhibit of this fact."

"You're right in that today's society may well interpret it that way. One day, though, the technology will become commonplace," Faceman responded coolly. "But looking at her data isn't going to help you."

"It'll be evidence that she abused *Mardock Scramble 09*."

"You won't have any luck there. From a legal standpoint, it's already difficult to judge what's *use* and what's *abuse*."

"What—?"

"The girl is still growing up. Any current data on her is no more than material for a comparative study. The girl is a genius."

"A genius? In battle?"

"No, in her ability to dissolve herself into the ether. 'Dispersing her self-consciousness,' I'm calling it for now."

"'Dispersing'?"

"The waveforms we've been picking up from her brain in her consciousness-threshold tests are very similar to those found when a person enters a trance state. I daresay it's a form of

autoimmune response, the dispersal and negation of her senses as a self-defense mechanism—something that the girl has developed in order to preserve a sense of psychological normalcy in the face of the atrocious conditions that life has thrown at her."

"In what way?" said Boiled.

"As you know, one of the most common side effects of grafting metallic fiber as replacement skin onto a person is that their mental balance ends up shot to pieces. Just as if we were to transplant, say, a bat's ears onto a human head—the animal would be bewildered and its brain wouldn't be able to cope," said Faceman.

"But you're saying that this girl is coping with the technology?"

"Her Interference Rate—all her consciousness-threshold figures—are over 80 percent."

Boiled was silent. This was a rare moment where he was actually shocked by what his opponent had to say.

"The fibers are embedded in the whole of her skin tissue. As her subconscious receives stimuli, so the fibers develop autonomously. The fibers we transplanted into your palm never even grew to the back of your hand. Think on that, and you'll realize just quite how *singular* a being this young lady is."

"So she's wrapped in a layer of skin tissue?"

"No, not 'wrapped'—it's assimilated perfectly. In time, it could extend to her mouth, the back of her eyelids, even some of her internal organs."

"Impossible." Boiled's voice rose, ever so slightly. Boiled noticed his own reaction, and it surprised him.

"I didn't want to believe it myself, but it's the truth. An incredible truth born out of the confluence of three factors: Dr. Easter's innovative technical developments, the existence of Oeufcoque, and the girl's upbringing. That's why we wanted her data at all costs, and that's why we let them use our labs in return."

"It's a fairly straightforward auxiliary function to give a brain the electronic interference abilities of a *snarc*, though?"

"Yes, but the same paintbrush wielded by two different hands produces two entirely different paintings. Some people are natural artists, others show no trace of talent despite the best tuition in the world. This is just like that. What's unique about this girl's *snarc* is a truly astounding level of concentration, her ability to focus her consciousness in on a narrow point, and her ability to diffuse all her senses. Theoretically the human body has the ability to respond to its own suggestions, manipulating its own senses at will. To feel warm when it wants to feel warm, to feel cold when it wants to feel cold, to feel nothing when it wants to feel nothing—even extend its control over its own inner workings. Through a deliberate program of training the subconscious, the body should be able to grasp everything that is happening all around it, intuitively, on a subconscious level," said Faceman.

"Theory is one thing, practice is quite another. There's no way that such a thing could actually exist—an ordinary person able to manipulate their senses on demand."

This made Faceman laugh. "The origins of your own *PseudoGravitational Float* were fairly innocuous at first, if you remember—it started off as technology designed to help people cope with heights. Wasn't it you yourself who mastered that technology so that you could walk across any surface, including ceilings and walls, at will? When I say that her data will be useless to you, I mean that it'd be impossible to try and extrapolate any general conclusions from it, just as it's

impossible to predict how she is likely to develop next."

"Still—her organic data, at least, will be of some use."

"Even that's completely unquantifiable at the moment," replied Faceman.

"Are you using *FES*?"

Faceman nodded. "*Functional Electronic Stimulus* treatment is being applied to her whole body. The original plan was to program her nervous system electronically in order to cure her of paralysis in her limbs, but…"

"So why is that unquantifiable?"

"Her skin tissue is already in the process of assimilating with her cerebellum. Of course, you could say that it's the skin tissue that is influencing the brain, rather than the other way around."

"Her skin is controlling her brain? Is such a thing even possible?"

"Human beings are, fundamentally speaking, holistic entities. Such a thing is *certainly* possible. It's safe to say that Rune-Balot is no longer human, but rather a creature formed by synthesis of human being and metal fibers. The fibers develop autonomously, in accordance with the spatial senses of her cerebellum, automatically creating hundreds of millions of electric patterns that allow her to apply optimal stimuli to her muscles and internal organs. In other words, the skin operates the brain, which in turn manipulates the rest of her body to her will: a state of affairs that we've never seen before."

"Why didn't that happen with my fibers?" asked Boiled.

"The only possible explanation I can think of is that the girl is a singularity. Dr. Easter did program a certain level of combat data into the structure of the metal fibers beforehand, but that only goes so far—she's long since outgrown that, and her abilities have developed to the point that the original data is completely redundant. No one other than this particular girl is capable of such a thing. Exactly the same as, for example, how you're the only one who was able to develop your *PGF* to the extent that you did."

"And how can I deal with her?" asked Boiled.

"Deal with—?" Faceman stopped and nodded, as if to say *It stands to reason*. "We're residents of Paradise. We don't share the same moralizing notions that the outside world has regarding war, weapons, and related technology. We don't consider them to be evil in and of themselves, and we don't consider the girl to be a threat in and of herself. But perhaps you feel that opposing the existence of creatures such as this girl gives you some sort of purpose in life, a *raison d'être*?"

Boiled's face revealed that not only could he not answer this question, he was looking for an answer to it himself.

"What is conflict and killing to you, Boiled? A means to an end or an end in itself?" It was the first time that Faceman had called him by his name since he'd arrived.

But Boiled wouldn't answer.

"Is it your desire to kill that's become your main driving force? Didn't you entrust yourself to Paradise in order to toughen you up, body and mind, ready for outer space? Isn't it rather miserable that the outcome of all that is a boundless killing machine?"

"The killer instinct in me is just that—instinct," Boiled said. "It's neither a means to an end nor an end in itself. The reasons behind my involvement in Paradise don't concern you; they didn't back in the day, and they don't now. More importantly, the person who has the right—and duty—to ask questions is not you, it's me." Boiled's tone was defiant. He continued: "And my third

question is this. What are Oeufcoque and the others trying to find out about Shell?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I've already seen the official petition to the Broilerhouse. There's a good chance that the Doctor and Oeufcoque are conducting their own private investigation on Shell."

"Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to divulge that—not to one whose only means of self-actualization is through killing."

"What are you saying?" said Boiled.

"I'm saying that giving you the information you want would be paramount to condoning murder. Ask me again once you've recovered your sense of value for human life."

All the expression disappeared from Boiled's face. As inhuman as his face was normally, this was one step further, hideously, oppressively blank.

"So who's going to show me the value of life? The people whose bodies were mangled behind closed doors in the name of science?"

Faceman dodged the question. "I'm not talking about the value of life. I'm talking about your own personal values."

Boiled leaned forward. "I know all about the many lives that Paradise has snuffed out. How other soldiers came here, what happened to them, and how they ended up dying."

"So you're trying to say that our aim is to murder people? Like some sort of concentration camp? That's a foolish way to look at what goes on here, and you know it. Of course there are some researchers here who treat their subjects as objects. But they are human beings too, and they have arrived at their own personal, sophisticated value systems, their own conceptions of the value of human life. Without this, you wouldn't last long as a researcher here—it'd be too tough on the mind."

"False value systems. Totally contrived."

"Of course they're contrived—what other sort of value system is there? Or are you saying that there's a physical, tangible object called a 'value' lying around somewhere, just waiting to be discovered so that everyone can see what the truth is?"

"My heart died in this so-called Paradise. I can no longer feel that there's any such thing as value to life."

"That's because the fear of death has been removed from you. The army—and you—wanted it so. To give a soldier a sense of immortality. There were many steps to this procedure, and you're the only one ever to follow it through to the end, voluntarily or otherwise."

"I've also forgotten sorrow and anger."

"At the time, our consciousness-threshold examination techniques weren't yet perfect…"

"I've even been robbed of my ability to sleep."

"*Asomniatic Activity*—the highest-priority research target we were given, designed to strengthen military personnel. You know very well that it used to be a matter of course for amphetamines to be prescribed to help soldiers stand up to the trials and tribulations of war—was that any better? If you remember, at the point you came to this facility, you were utterly dependent on stimulants—total addiction. All we did was try and save you, and countless other soldiers, from such a fate."

"Save me, you say?"

"That's right. Save you. I felt so then, and I still feel I was right. I have a lot of time for people who accept their burden and take what life throws at them."

"Are you saying, Professor, that you'll be able to teach me again whether life has any value?" asked Boiled, an unusually dignified and serious tone to the words spilling forth from his lips, even for him. "Does life have any value?"

But Faceman shook his head. He smiled placidly and continued. "That question is folly—you have it all upside down. Value is not something that just exists. It's a concept, a construct. And when people neglect their duty to construct their own valuation of life, they revert back to being no more than beasts. After all, what is society if not a peculiarly human invention that allows people to conceptualize and propagate their own belief systems?"

Boiled remained silent, his eyes dark.

Faceman continued in his quiet voice. "It's been observed on numerous occasions that the act of killing other members of one's species is not limited to human beings—it's a trait observable in all animals. The reason that animals are furnished with the ability to kill is so that they *can* kill. For animals, the impetus to kill is always there, constantly at the ready. That's their system of self-perpetuation, you see. Their system is pure and simple, just like human society."

"Are you calling me an animal?"

"All human beings are animals, of course. But you, having lost your sense of values, are trying to fill that gaping hole with a particular set of instincts—that's why you're an animal. When animals cannibalize each other or persecute outsiders or create outcasts or commit suicide, or patricide, or infanticide, or fratricide—all these apparently abnormal acts are nothing more than a regression to a base animal instinct, when you think about it. Animals learn from their environment and their circumstances and pass their learned behaviors on to their children, who inherit what they can from their parents. But when environments and circumstances change so that they appear to contradict what we have learned—well, that's when learning goes out the window, and animal instinct kicks in to produce these behaviors that we call 'abnormal.' Whenever there's an outbreak of killing within a species, this is usually the primary factor."

"Are you saying that it's abnormal for me to have a gun?" Boiled asked.

Suddenly, Faceman's eyes narrowed, and he threw the question back at Boiled. "So, when I said 'abnormal,' you immediately associated the word with your gun, did you?"

Boiled didn't answer.

Faceman smiled and continued. "Abnormal behavior could be, for example, the ill-treatment of other members of your own species. There are some animals, for example, which, for various reasons, toy with weaker beings before killing them. Even their own children. There are some cases where they rape their own children repeatedly, or eat their children. Besides that, there are countless cases in which animals engage in group suicide, or end up eating each other or killing their own parents."

Faceman uttered this entire speech with his usual, apparently disinterested, tone. Boiled stood and listened without emotion.

"Let me give you another example. In the savannas of a protected nature reserve, when the numbers in a herd of herbivores grow beyond a certain level, the herd engages in conduct that can only be described as provocative. Namely, they find a carnivore and deliberately pass close by, encouraging the carnivore to chase them. When, eventually, one of the herd falls by the wayside at the end of the chase and falls victim to the predator, the others in the herd stop and watch as their fellow gets ripped to pieces. Scientists have analyzed brain wave patterns that, in these situations, indicate that the surviving herd members are not just excited, but also *enjoying* the spectacle."

It was as if Faceman was methodically retrieving the data stored in his mind, selecting the best piece of information to impart next. "And what about the lowly insect that's organized into the most regimented sort of society. Take the bee—in every hive, there's always a particular bee that isn't assigned any role. It isn't allowed to do anything, and it just gets ignored by the other bees and dies. The existence of such a pitiful creature is usually explained as being a necessary measure to keep the population fluctuating, but essentially what's happening is that the majority are finding an outlet for stress by creating an outcast. It's a type of amusement. Then, there are the activities that are supposedly unique to human beings—take war, for example. Your former line of work."

Boiled said nothing. He stared at Faceman, a dark glint brimming up in his eyes.

"You think that human beings are the only animals to wage war? Think again. It's actually fair to say that pretty much any animal with a herd instinct will wage war one way or another. From insects to herbivores—all living creatures wage war. Ants, for example, will attack a rival anthill and raid its food supplies. They even occupy the other's territory, enslaving the surviving ants. This sort of action is an exceedingly common animal impulse, in fact. So, you see how it is? Human beings are a long way from escaping their animal instincts, as I'm sure you understand clearly. In which case, what exactly is the difference between man and animal?"

Faceman took a breath here to better enunciate his next phrase. "The creation of values," he said. "On one hand, animals have come up with all sorts of reasons—besides simple predation—to kill each other. On the other hand, over time human beings have come up with a notion of valuing life and death. It's not that life has any value in and of itself. It's that human beings have come up with a notion of value and applied that in various ways to the idea of life. In doing so, man started to resist total domination by his baser instincts and managed to give birth to a society overwhelmingly stronger and more complex than any other, surpassing all other creatures and ascending the pinnacle of life on earth as master of all he surveys."

Here, Faceman opened his eyes wide and tilted his head, that is, his whole self, forward. "What is the definition of a human being? It's based on whether a creature understands the concept of a value system. Human infants are very much like animals in that they don't understand the idea of values, but then they study them, and in doing so arrive at their own sense of self-worth, as well as the value of other objects, recognizing the value of other people, and in learning how to heighten their own sense of values they finally begin to participate in society as a human being. Although, on the other hand, there is a certain type of person who seems to have found his niche in society without a fully developed value system—and they exist as little more than animals."

Then Faceman grinned mischievously, although Boiled didn't respond. "Oeufcoque knows what values are," Faceman said, his eyes gentle and narrow, but in a tone of voice clearly designed to elicit a response from Boiled. But it did not work.

"Originally he was just selected as a Living Unit because a mouse's metabolic system seemed extremely compatible with what we were trying to achieve, and he happened to be selected as *that mouse*. But as he had his intelligence amplified, he gained a personality. He understood the concept of values, and so he changed from just another lab animal to a creature called Oeufcoque. Oeufcoque made a conscious effort to amass his own value system and tried to recognize value in others. He did this because he recognized that this was the main reason human society has managed to develop to the extent that it has. Surmounting crisis after crisis, human will has always striven to rebuild society anew, to develop it to the highest level possible. The reason Oeufcoque

has elected to concern himself with all of society's ills is precisely because he recognized and understood all of this."

The Professor continued in earnest. "You're the exact opposite—the very definition of folly. Even as you try to erode your own sense of values, regressing back into an animal state, you still desperately cling to human society. If you're looking for the opportunity to kill, pure and simple, then why not head to a jungle in a nature reserve and kill all the animals and fish—bugs and germs, even—that you want? There's no reason that you have to be around humans."

Boiled responded for the first time, almost as a reflex reaction. "I was a soldier. I defended one set of lives and I studied warcraft in order to fight more effectively against another set of lives. It's an existence designed for a high level of defense and attack. Even now, I protect lives even as I take them."

"Is that the thing you're most proud of in your life? What a bundle of contradictions human beings are. On one occasion they will devise a killing machine called an army in order to better defend themselves. At other times they'll go on a looting spree as a means to increase prosperity—even though doing so makes their victims think of them in turn as a collective object worth attacking in the future, rather than one worth cherishing. And these are your values, are they?"

"What would a person who has deliberately isolated himself in a manufactured paradise know of society's values?" asked Boiled.

"It's precisely *because* we understand society's values that we founded Paradise here. This is my challenge to my own values."

"I always challenge my own values," said Boiled.

Faceman opened his eyes, seemingly impressed. "Indeed? So, what are you, then?"

"In order to defend one set of values, humans have to annihilate opposing sets of values. I'm a being created specifically to bring about that annihilation. If it's humans who make values, it's also humans who break them."

Faceman sighed a small sigh. "What a profound thought—and yet so helpless at the same time. Is this your compensation for your own sense of helplessness? Having had your own emotions denied you, with all the highs and lows that this entails, you seek to bring about nihilism in all living beings?"

"This place you call Paradise was built on the back of people's broken values. You're the ones who know all about toying with nihilism," replied Boiled.

"Values come and values go. We've thrown out sacred cows in the past, and I'm sure we will again in the future. But as long as we remain fixed on our aim of creation, new values emerge from the detritus of the old. This is most definitely *not* nihilism."

"How is this facility—which treats human beings as objects—how is it in a position to evaluate anything?"

"If we've treated people as objects, it's because our observational techniques are subject to our current limited physical and mental consciousnesses. We're still inexperienced. In the grand scheme of things, we're still at an embryonic stage, or at most eggs in a basket. That's why we value Oeufcoque so highly—the Golden Egg, able to sniff out the odor of souls." Faceman stopped speaking and stared at Boiled. "And you, aren't you the same, Rusty Gun? I recognize all too well that it takes the full extent of your considerable willpower to suppress your killer instincts. But that's not enough—at the moment, you're still just a human-shaped weapon. How do you ever hope to regain your soul?"

Boiled stood silent a moment. “I kill in order to protect my client’s rights and interests. I don’t kill for any other reason.”

“Human beings strive to become gods and are ever frustrated in their efforts. You try and regain your emotions—the missing ingredient to make you an omnipotent god—through using your killer instincts to try and steal them back. But that path won’t lead you anywhere other than down your own road to ruin. The proudest warriors and hunters in history come across as modest and humble in comparison to you.”

Boiled’s hand went back into his breast pocket. This time there was contact with steel. “Soldiers have their values constantly repudiated on the front lines. Call me worthless if you like—it means nothing to me. The only people who recognize my value are my enemies.”

“The only people who see value in you are people who repudiate their own values,” said Faceman.

“Deep in their hearts, all people know that there’s no such thing as real value.” Boiled withdrew his gun. Without a moment’s hesitation, he pointed it at Faceman in front of him. “I need you to answer my question. What is Oeufcoque checking up on Shell about?”

“You don’t really need me to answer, now that the poisonous rust has so thoroughly spread through your body. As things stand, you’re nothing more than a motor propelled by survival instincts and your intent to kill. Do really think that having Oeufcoque in your hand will serve as a substitute soul?”

Boiled cocked the gun. A second later, there was a ferocious roar, and the white table flew apart in all directions, clods of earth flying through the air.

There was a sudden gust of wind that blew away the lingering acrid smell of burnt gunpowder. The cage that had been on the table was now floating in midair, protected by an invisible shield, and from within the cage the Professor stared out at Boiled with a serious expression. “The technology you use to deflect bullets was developed right here.”

Boiled fired. The bullet was deflected, smashing to pieces a tree stump in the background. Such incredible destructive force—and yet it was unable to influence the state of affairs in the slightest.

Boiled grunted. The Professor’s eyes narrowed. The trigger was pulled again.

This time his bullet grazed the cage, sending sparks flying into the air.

The gravitational field had been breached, and the bullets could now brush past the cage.

Yet—that was as far as it went. Even so, Boiled kept his gun pointed right at Faceman.

“Why don’t you ask your own client?” the Professor asked quietly. “Why would we know the details of what Oeufcoque or Dr. Easter or Rune-Balot are looking for? This case is between yourselves. Why doesn’t your client share this information with *you*?”

Boiled stared at the Professor, gun still pointed at him.

But Boiled pulled the trigger no more.

“Do you really think that Oeufcoque would ever return to you—you who have cast aside all emotions, even *trust*?” asked Faceman. His voice was terribly, terribly sad.

–This is a…what do you call it?

Tweedledum was in the water, taken aback.

–That's it…a storm. I've never seen one before, but this is definitely a storm.

A *storm* was what Tweedledum called the swirls of information that were flying about Balot. He was shocked.

–I've worked out how to trace a program back to its origin, I think.

From the outside, Balot looked as if she were swimming gently underwater.

The information that Balot's words referred to flew violently around the water, turbulent currents forming themselves into liquid electronic circuits that could be expressed and understood semantically, so that Balot could effortlessly read and communicate the information.

Brain—this word, with all its meanings and nuances, became the foundation of the information now. Compiled around the image of Shell, she collected every piece of information that was conceivably related to her search before filtering them out for relevance.

Balot's state was now such that all she had to do was bring something to mind, open up her heart, and it was done. Whatever image she sought. This would then pass through the artificial Lightite skin that covered her whole body, transforming into electronic signals, *snarcing* through the swirls of information with great vigor.

–There's a copy…definitely…a trace…

A large bubble—a long sigh—escaped from the artificial respiratory organ that was appended to her mouth. She continued with half-open eyes.

–Eighteen years' worth of his memories have all been transformed into recorded data…

She looked up at the light above her with her eyes half-asleep. Her eyes then closed further.

–It's all coming together.

When he heard Balot's words, Tweedledum gave a short shrill chirp of surprise.

–Amazing stuff, babe…

And then, at that instant, all the information was sorted; the irrelevancies and the dead-ends discarded, only the cold, hard facts remained.

–I've managed to analyze a specialist computer program used by Shell to transfer his memories onto writable media. There are traces of evidence suggesting that the program has been implemented. What happens is that all his memories relating to his five senses are selected and isolated, leaving the parts of his memory relating to his imagination and his desires intact. So, when it's all turned into recorded data, the *gestalt of his brain's memory form is destroyed and he loses all his physical memories.*

The information was now pouring out automatically, as if Balot was no longer speaking of her own accord.

–There's a particular type of storage file he needs to use in order to save all eighteen years' worth of audiovisual memories… It's a particularly complicated storage file that requires a very specific type of metalwork to make. That's how we determine our route—traces of that metalworking.

–Aha! So there's your magic bottle that holds eighteen years' worth of brains, huh?

Tweedledum said to Balot, who was now virtually sleep-walking, or sleep-floating.

–And where is that bottle, right?

–Every time he does his money-laundering, he skims a bit off the top. He falsifies his own expenses. I think I've worked out a pattern. Using this I can work out roughly what his fortune is—both his official one and his black market one. Every time a girl dies, more money swirls around…

Balot felt a chill in her heart as she transmitted this, as though she had swallowed a cold knife. Her pulse was steady, and yet she felt a sharp pounding in her heart.

–Why me?

As she asked the question, the information that was swirling all around her seemed to change course.

–That's it…

Balot stared at the silent swirls of light that surrounded her. She took a deep breath, trying to put aside the feeling of sheer hatred, the overwhelming desire to kill that had sprouted up inside her and was now rising to the fore. Trying to calm herself, she exhaled slowly.

–The answers are all in Shell's memories.

This was Balot's conclusion.

–For a memory transplant…you need lots of money and the right facilities. The flow of money, evidence of computer programs being used, Shell's actions, special facilities for memory transplants, payments to certain people, the girls used at the time…

Before long, Balot could feel, through her skin, all the results of her searches. She had her moment of *satori*, when she knew that no matter how many more times she interrogated the information she would only arrive at one inevitable conclusion.

In her dream state, Balot felt all the cogs of the wheel slotting into place.

–Have you found it, babe?

Tweedledum's voice was distinctly under pressure now.

–Yup—got it.

Balot slowly turned over to Tweedledum.

–The inside of our egg—rotten to the core.

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–Mr. Boiled? Boss? Mr. Iron Man? Fuck! Why isn't this thing connecting? Piece of shit.

Medium spoke not with his voice but through the transmitter implanted in his head. The electronic signal disappeared mournfully into space.

Medium checked how long he had now been inside this giant structure. Just over an hour. In that time he had managed to penetrate the security defenses with ease, in the process killing three guards with his two-hundred-thousand-dollar butter knife—that magnetized blade.

His knife made easy work of the three, and he cut them into pieces to store them in the lockers in the guardroom, not forgetting to first strip the uniform off the guard closest in size to him. Medium then donned the uniform himself.

After that, Medium had obtained all the information he could from the guardroom. The

blueprints for the whole facility, including the plumbing and wiring. He downloaded what he could from the information circuits, copying it straight into his intracranial hardware, and took a few minutes to digest it fully.

When he had finished that operation, he covered his bald head—his glassy pate suggested more "inpatient" than "security guard"—with the regulation uniform cap, and left the room.

He had followed the patrol route carefully and had planned on contacting his new boss, the one that sent him here, but now he wasn't able to get through. It seemed that the whole building was set up to block the transmission of most electromagnetic frequencies. He had noticed back in the guardroom that there was a particular wavelength that did seem to work, but even that was being shielded by something at the moment.

With his knife still gripped casually in his right hand, Medium continued down the corridor as if he were on a pleasant evening stroll. He passed a number of doors to either side of him, occasionally branching out into a spacious lobby or a terrace encased in glass, but there was almost nobody around. Even when he came across the occasional group of people, it was always old people attached to machines, or researchers huddled together in deep discussion. There was no sign of anyone who looked remotely like a young lady.

Eventually, the hardware in his head scored a hit. "Rune-Balot," Medium murmured. His internal computer had managed to crack the flimsy password that protected the visitor records. He grinned. Both corners of his mouth swerved up to abnormal lengths. Behind his sunglasses his eyes glittered red, and Medium moved toward the area that the data entry pointed toward.

It wasn't long before he arrived. There was a thick door in his way. Medium got out his Lockbuster Card and shoved it casually into the slot in the wall. He looked into the retina scan with his mechanized red eyes, which projected a fake iris for the scanner to recognize. Then he took from his pocket a human finger that he had removed from one of the security guards he'd killed and placed it onto the DNA scan, gripping tight. The fingers on his own left hand—blown off only the other day—had been replaced with electronic substitutes. His new metal fingers picked up the finger on the DNA scan and crushed it. Blood dripped out onto the machine, and the ID check was complete.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty! I'm coming for you!" Medium was laughing now, a high-pitched squeal. The door opened with a heavy rumble.

He took a step into the room. "Oho!"

He scanned the insides of the room.

Against the backdrop of the verdant foliage, the bright sunlight, and the warm breeze, Medium danced about with his brutal knife held in one hand. It was almost as if he were waltzing. "Man, this is hardcore! They're not kidding when they call this place Paradise! What a blast! What a great place to play with my little kitty-cat!"

He swayed from left to right, brandishing his knife every which way. Plants and flowers fell to the ground, burnt, scorched. Silver flashed all around, and his eyes glowed bright red.

Then, in an instant, his manic spree was over. Medium had seen someone. He crouched down and approached, circling around the trees so as not to be seen.

"Who are those guys?" he murmured to himself, exhaling through his nostrils.

No one was moving. Some were in wheelchairs, others lying down in the gaps in the shrubbery. All were staring up into the sky with content expressions. It was as if a number of stationary mannequins had been dotted about the place as decoration.

Medium stayed in the thicket for a while, observing the stationary people, but then he revealed himself, walking toward them with rough, deliberate footfalls.

And yet no one seemed interested in either his gleaming red eyes or the blade in his hand. They didn't even try and look at him.

Soon he was standing next to a woman with abnormally white skin. She was sitting in a wheelchair. He peered at her, stooping over her to take a sniff. He heard her breathing, faintly. The woman showed not the slightest movement. Medium rubbed the top of her head with his knife-wielding hand. He parted her hair, as if savoring the sensation, and noticed that there were surgery scars across the back of her scalp.

He brought his knife-wielding hand back to his own chin, deep in thought.

Then he took a step back to gauge his distance before kicking the wheelchair viciously.

"Hey, you fucking blow-up doll! What's the matter? Look at me, why don't you?" He kicked her repeatedly as he shouted.

The wheelchair trembled but absorbed most of the impacts, and when the woman looked as if she were about to topple over, a cushioned arm extended from the chair's frame to catch her body, propping her up.

Medium snickered. "What a fetish someone must have. All these living sex dolls…"

He looked around with a fierce grin on his face. However much he shouted, the people just stayed absolutely still without lifting a finger, the gentle breeze blowing against their blue hospital robes.

Medium took the hair of the woman he had just kicked about and put it neatly back into place. He took her hand that was resting on the armrest and stared at it intently. He picked up the fingers and licked them. Then he placed her left hand onto the armrest, fixed it into position, and severed her hand with his knife.

The woman's body stiffened in an instant.

The smell of burning flesh pierced his nose as the wound was instantly cauterized. There was no blood. Medium took the severed hand in his own, smiled a satisfied smile, and placed the hand on the woman's lap with a polite gesture.

Then he fixed her other hand to the armrest. He took his knife to her pinky.

Her pinky fell to the ground, like an off-cut from a vegetable he was paring.

He proceeded to neatly snip off her middle finger and then her thumb, enjoying the uneven shapes that he was creating in the process. The fingers fell one by one to the side of the wheelchair. As he did so, tears started welling up in the woman's eyes, eventually brimming over and rolling down her cheeks. Medium noticed this and brought his mouth to her face, sticking out his tongue so that it tapered at its point, and licked the tears as they flowed down.

As he did so, her last finger fell to the ground, and Medium laughed. "This is great! Why don't I see if I can replace my fingers here? And then on to my little kitty. That's it. There's plenty of treasure here to enjoy. It's all wonderful. Wonderful!"

Just then,

–What are you doing?

A sound reverberated around Medium's head. "Wha—?"

Medium leapt up. He was so surprised that he flew through the air, and even as he landed he went bounding back for cover in the vegetation. Running away, he reached the shade of a tree and quickly scanned the area with his glittering eyes. His breathing was rough. His face was a mask of

fear.

More interference waves hit Medium.

–Are you the person who just accessed Balot's data? I'm sorry, but to get Rune-Balot's main data you need special dispensation from the Professor him—

"Where the hell are you? You fucking hacker bastard! Fucker, you killed my friends! You killed all my friends!" Medium screamed. Knife firmly in hand, he jumped out of the shadows, looking from left to right.

–I'm over here. Gosh, you like to talk a lot, don't you? It's the first time I've ever heard anyone speak in such a loud voice.

Medium's voice stopped.

A young man walked slowly and steadily into the clearing.

He had evidently seen Medium—noticed his knife, even—but showed no sign of wariness.

–I'm Tweedledee. Who are you?

He stopped just a short way away from Medium.

"Me? Who am I, you ask? Right, I get it now!" Medium took his sunglasses off, staring at the youth. His bright red eyes were wide open.

"You did it. Them. My friends. *My pack*. You're the one who did them."

Tweedledee tilted his head to one side, staring at Medium as if he were trying to work something out.

–You have a hard drive in your head—

"Stop speaking inside my mind!"

Tweedledee seemed surprised. He watched with furrowed brow as Medium crushed his own sunglasses into little pieces. But he showed no sign of fear—indeed, he looked on with interest as Medium smiled a smile that could only be described as brutality personified.

–I was just—

"Get out of my head!" Medium screamed, and the blade in his right hand flashed, light reflecting from it straight into Tweedledee's eyes.

Tweedledee squinted hard, surprised.

That was the moment. Medium ran toward him and seized Tweedledee's arm.

The hair on Tweedledee's arm stood on end at the touch of metal.

He tried to wriggle free from Medium's grip but couldn't shake him off.

"I'm going to look after you good and proper. Pet you plenty. Come here. Over here!"

–You know that we're allowed to deal with violent visitors in a number of ways? Tweedledee explained patiently and politely.

Medium's expression went blank. His whole body radiated tension.

The very next instant, that tension transformed into something much harsher.

The fist that gripped the knife smashed into Tweedledee's face.

There was a damp *gush* sound, and Tweedledee's nose split open, releasing copious quantities of blood.

Tweedledee turned his face away, not making a sound. He made no effort to cover his face with his one free hand.

Medium said nothing and punched him again and again. Tweedledee's lips, ears, and eyebrows all split open.

Tweedledee's face was now a half-swollen mass, drenched in blood.

"I'll look after you all right, you little brat. I'll look after you good and proper." Medium licked Tweedledee's blood off the back of his hand with his long tongue.

–I'll put up with this till the point that security automatically kicks in, Tweedledee informed him, raising his battered head. His face was serene—as if he didn't feel that little thing called pain.

Medium was frozen to the spot in fear and anger.

–I thought I might try and experience pain again—it's been a while. But it's not very nice, after all, is it? I just snarced *the pain away, to be honest.*

Medium gave a piercing cry. He punched again. The skin peeled off Tweedledee's arm, and more blood came forth.

"Such pretty fingers. Beautiful fingers. Tastes good too. That taste of special blood." Medium laughed cruelly. He punched the boy again and raised his knife.

Suddenly, Tweedledee was free. He tried to work out why he had suddenly been released from the grip of the man in front of him, and then he found the answer.

His right arm that had been in Medium's grip had been severed from his elbow down.

It was no longer attached to him. It was in Medium's hand.

The wound was cauterized, bloodless.

Tweedledee's throat suddenly wobbled. "Ah…" he said.

Tweedledee's eyes widened—surprised at the fact that he had just spoken.

Medium stepped forward again. Giggling, he kissed the severed arm and tossed it aside.

His blade came up again. Tweedledee lifted his left arm reflexively to protect himself, and the blade cut through his wrist like so much wax, causing his hand to go flying through the air.

"Now we're talking… I'm liking your new look," Medium said, baring his teeth and laughing.

"Ah…ah…" Tweedledee gasped. "My voice…breathing…it's been a while."

Opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish, he looked straight at Medium and, incredibly, smiled. His face was swollen and bloodied, and both his hands had been severed from his body. Still, he never stopped smiling. Sweetly, innocently.

Indeed it was Medium who stopped smiling. "What the hell are you…?" He stood rooted to the spot as if he had suddenly been overcome by fear.

–Security's been activated, I'm afraid. Nothing I can do now.

Medium was startled as yet another sound echoed through the back of his mind.

Suddenly a number of shadows surrounded Medium. Hurriedly he readied his knife. When he recognized the shadows, though, his heart sank.

Silhouettes of what looked like large fish—spinning around him.

Medium looked up at the sky with bloodshot eyes. He gave a short grunt of surprise. His eyes were pinned open by the sight of *giant sharks* flying through the air.

–Over here, please, everyone, called Tweedledee, raising his severed arms to the skies.

–Security's given permission, so you can just go ahead and eat this guy.

Tweedledee turned casually to look at Medium from underneath his swollen, battered eyelids.

"What the…" Medium was in shock. And that was the moment. One of the sharks circling the skies turned downward to face him. Then, with unbelievable speed, it plunged toward Medium. He didn't even have time to react.

The shark's jaws gaped open, revealing a mouth full of raw redness, and Medium saw that it was packed full of layers and layers of sharp teeth.

A cry of despair escaped from Medium's lips. A cry that seemed to be squeezed out of his whole body.

Medium raised his left arm reflexively to protect his head, and it was this that the shark bit into.

The next moment, Medium's whole body was lifted into the air.

"Aaaargh!" Medium shrieked. The flesh on his arm was being shredded noisily, Medium's own body weight pulling him down against the teeth. The pain was unbearable. Completely disorientated now, he swung his knife wildly at the shark, and there was an explosion of sparks and noise.

The magnetized blade didn't reach the shark but instead was repelled in midair amid a blaze of sparks and lightning.

"Agh! It hurts, it hurts…aarrgh…"

Half-crazed now, he waved his arm around like a madman, but then another shark's teeth took hold of his knife-wielding arm. Medium's body was spread in a Y-shape, and he was lifted through the air in a giant arc, no more than a meat puppet.

His legs flailed in the air, and two more sharks bit into each of them. He was now splayed like an X, ready to be ripped to pieces. His flesh was cut to ribbons, almost as if he'd been run through a giant sewing machine, and there were loud ripping noises as the sharks tore the meat from the man's bones.

Medium cried out, piercing and shrill. His lungs and throat screamed automatically, so intense was the pain of being ripped to pieces. He lost all control of his body, and urine started dribbling from his crotch.

Then Medium's voice stopped. He was so overwhelmed by fear that he could no longer make a sound.

A number of other sharks approached, prodding his crotch with their snouts. They seemed drawn to the smell of his urine.

Before long, one of them bit into his crotch. Medium could only cry out in a pathetic whimper. Then, as if that was the signal to go, the sharks all piled into the area between his legs, teeth bared.

Medium's unearthly screams echoed throughout Paradise.

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"You poor thing. What a violent visitor you had to put up with, Tweedledee," Faceman said, staring into space. "Head straight on over to First Aid and have them fix you up. Your arms should be better in two or three days. There's a good boy. Let's just check that there were no other victims. We're fine over at this end."

Faceman then turned his attention back to that which was right in front of him: Boiled.

In turn Boiled tried to guess what Faceman's words had meant—all the while with his gun pointed firmly at the Professor's face. His own expression was blank and inorganic, as if his face were competing with the muzzle of the gun to see which could come across as more inhuman.

Faceman looked him up and down for a good while, then sighed deeply. "Violence comes in

all sorts of shapes and sizes."

That was the moment a piercing scream ripped through the calm of the white birch forest.

First there was the scream. Then, a sharp silver object. It fell in an arc, but was repelled by Faceman and Boiled's *PGF* and ended up thudding into a nearby tree stump.

Boiled glanced toward it. A knife. The one Medium used. Its blade was shot to pieces, with magnetized sparks flying off it.

The screams came closer and arrived like a storm.

Faceman was still looking at Boiled, and at that moment something fell from the sky and nearly onto Boiled's head.

Red droplets.

A handful dripped down on the grass here and there. Then, all of a sudden, redness fell like rain.

Boiled and Faceman were in the midst of a sudden vermilion shower. Blood and flesh rained down from the heavens.

The cries grew closer. They were now almost overhead. The white birch trees were streaked with red. Thousands of unidentifiable pieces of crunched-up flesh and bone rained down, catching on the leaves, drawing down the branches with their weight.

The surroundings were now painted a vivid white and red, and a suffocating smell of blood filled Boiled's nose. Faceman, of course, had a nose but no lungs.

Only the areas immediately surrounding Faceman and Boiled remained clear.

Beyond their invisible domes were the fleeting shadows of the giant fish, cutting through the red and white.

"The Cherubim—guardian angels of Paradise. They're particularly obedient to Tweedledee's orders." Faceman's eyes narrowed, and he looked up at the school of sharks flying around overhead. "They have installed in them a type of *PseudoGravitational Float* slightly different from yours. They swim in a sea of magnetic fields. And that same sea will render all your weapons and defenses completely powerless."

Faceman continued in his matter-of-fact tone. "They won't trouble us, though. Their sensory fields are programmed with a system that limits their perception of potential targets. In other words, the only things they're able to comprehend are those who we decide are enemies who've invaded from the outside."

At that moment, the cries—from the one who *had* been designated as such an enemy—testified to a fear such as had never been experienced before. Then the voice changed again, into a high-pitched whimper that called out Boiled's name. A pitiful voice. A voice of one who, faced with a certain and terrible death, desperately tried to inflict a lasting impression on those still alive to hear.

Boiled, though, wouldn't even look up. He simply stared at Faceman, gun still pointed right at him, as if he were waiting for the Professor's next move.

Faceman sighed again, shaking his head. "By the way, do you know why it is that sharks attack people?" he asked in a tone of voice that seemed to rebuke Boiled for his unwaveringly hostile posture. "In a peaceful swimming spot, for example. Or a beach famous for its gentle waves? Do you know why they suddenly bare their teeth at humans?"

Boiled didn't answer.

"This question was a puzzle for many years. The sharks aren't usually hungry at the time of

their attacks, and sharks as a species don't show any territorial tendencies—they're not generally bothered by anyone encroaching on their space. There are exceptions, of course—some of the documented attacks on people are due to hunger, or out of aggression. But no more than a few percent of all cases. After all, sharks haven't evolved to attack any unidentified object when hungry or angry—they wouldn't survive, in the long run. So why, then? Are human beings such an easy prey for sharks? Fish are a much easier prey than humans, who are many times the size of the fishes that constitute the average prey for a shark."

The screams overhead started to die out. The sound of red rainfall lessened, and Faceman continued speaking as if he were revealing a juicy secret. "For a long time there was a big question as to why sharks attacked humans when it was apparently neither necessary nor useful for them to do so—but the answer was actually staring us in the face. So simple, in fact, that no one was able to work it out."

The cries overhead stopped completely, ending abruptly mid-scream. Medium had evidently given up the ghost. Faceman looked up at the sharks as they greedily feasted on the clumps of flesh and bone that no longer resembled any remotely human shape.

"They attack people out of *curiosity*," he said. "They turn their teeth on humans just as humans in turn have an impulse to peer at an unknown object or reach out and touch something that takes their interest. It just so happens that the shark's most developed instruments are their teeth, their sense of smell, and their sense of taste. They just want to know what these things that are floating about the beach are. To know and to taste—metaphorically and literally. The shark is able to sniff out a single drop of blood in the ocean from a distance of many kilometers—why shouldn't it be driven by the desire to *know*, to taste what it has just smelled?"

Faceman gave Boiled a look to say that he was now about to speak more seriously than ever. "Shall I tell you what the true nature of violence is, Boiled? It's curiosity. That's what's lurking in the shadows, behind almost every single act of violence anywhere. To *know* everything of your target and to exercise your own strength and will. To taste everything that there is to taste about oneself. Whatever your motive is for fighting—the feeling of victory, a sense of duty, to compensate for feelings of helplessness, as a road to self-actualization, or due to abnormal character traits—the true nature, the essence of violence remains the same."

It was as if he were patiently explaining to Boiled why exactly it was that Boiled was pointing the gun at him.

"There's no impulse in this world more violent than curiosity. And, paradoxically, it's none other than curiosity that drives people, and animals, on to live. Those who understand this fact—and strive to resist it—they're the ones who are worthy of the name *human*."

Faceman finished speaking and stared at Boiled more closely than ever. "Boiled, my friend, do you really understand where your curiosity—your *interests*—are taking you in life?"

"The only thing that interests me these days is annihilation." Boiled's voice was dignified and solemn.

Without warning, he lowered his gun. At the same time the electromagnetic field surrounding his body started to fade away. "I sense someone employing powerful electronic interference somewhere in this facility." Boiled raised his other hand into the air as he spoke.

Faceman realized that the regenerative metal fibers in Boiled's hand were responding to a powerful *snarc* coming from somewhere else in the facility.

"I will now proceed to search for the person who's causing this electronic interference. Any

attempt to obstruct me will be penalized under the law," said Boiled.

"Ah, but you do realize that the punishment doesn't always fit the crime?" Faceman answered in a way that seemed designed to poke fun at Boiled. "What's more, you do realize that if you try and move from this spot right now, the Cherubim will bring the down the full force of Paradise's punishment on you."

"They can try." Boiled spun around.

As soon as Boiled started to walk away, one of the sharks circling the skies responded.

Boiled didn't even look up at the shark that was now plunging down toward him with flashing teeth.

Vicious sparks erupted as the shark slammed into the *PseudoGravitational Float* wall that surrounded Boiled's body, deflecting the shark completely. Even so, the shark stayed hovering above him, mouth still open, inching closer to Boiled by generating a *PseudoGravitational Float* of its own.

"My consciousness-threshold figure, with the magnetic devices implanted in me, is above 95 percent." Boiled looked back at Faceman.

Faceman opened his eyes in surprise. "When you were in Paradise, the figure wasn't even 60 percent. Are you saying that life in the pathologically disturbed society of the outside world made the machinery in your body meld with your flesh to such an extent that—"

"I'm no longer your creation. I'm a monster, a creature fallen from Paradise." As he spoke, he pointed his gun at the shark above him.

The shark's teeth grated against the magnetic wall, making a keening sound.

Or rather—the wall emanating from Boiled was stopping the shark from closing its mouth and getting away.

Boiled casually placed his gun-wielding arm inside the shark's mouth.

At a stroke the shark's *PGF* wall was ruptured, and the muzzle of Boiled's gun roared to life.

There was an explosion. The single shot—bolstered by Boiled's *PGF*—was all it took to rip the shark apart from the inside, causing it to splatter like a burst water balloon.

Boiled's revolver was more like a tank gun than a pistol—certainly, it was just as powerful.

If someone like Balot had tried to fire it, her hand would probably have been ripped off by the recoil.

Boiled was able to wield such an impressive weapon not just because of his physical strength but also because he could use his *PseudoGravitational Float* to support it.

The other sharks were now swimming around quickly in the sky, on the alert for Boiled.

The atmosphere was pregnant with greed and deadly rage—and teeth.

"When did the sharks ask you to give them the ability to fly through the air?" Boiled asked, his dark eyes fixed on the swarm of sharks above him.

"One three-dimensional space seems to be as good as another for sharks. Water or air, it's all the same to them. In much the same way as one place is as good as another as a battlefield for you."

Another soft rainfall came from above their heads. The rain was no longer red. Cleaning equipment was in operation to wash the blood away.

The outlines of the sharks could still be seen speeding their way through the rain. Then, with terrifying speed, they flew at Boiled, a mass of teeth and artificial gravity: toward his head, his front, his back, his flanks.

Boiled moved. He took a step forward, readying his gun in front of him.

The noise that ensued could no longer be described as simple gunfire; it was a series of explosions. The shark that charged at Boiled head-on had its head blown into tiny fragments, with the rest of its body careening into a white birch tree behind Boiled's back, the shark's internal organs splattering across the clearing, giving off the stench of ammonia.

One by one the sharks were crushed by the force of Boiled's bullets—or, in the case of those who did make it as far as his *PGF* field, by the force of impact as they slammed into his invisible shield, tumbling over to the ground, unable to move.

The keen smell of ammonia and shark blood pervaded the air, and the surrounding trees were now repainted anew in a bright red even more vivid than before.

Boiled sidestepped quickly from left to right, and one by one, with lethal accuracy, shot down the bundles of flying teeth as they approached him.

Before long there were ten or so sharks blown out of the sky and heaped on the floor. The remaining dozen or so sharks were now circling overhead at a safe distance, perplexed.

Boiled just stood there wordlessly in a sea of shark blood, staring at Faceman.

Not a single drop of the shark blood stained his body.

His eyes showed an utter lack of interest in continuing his conversation with Faceman.

All he was thinking about was how to smash the thick *PGF* field—one far beyond that of the sharks—that surrounded Faceman's cage.

"So you choose conflict right to the bitter end, do you? Whether it's quarrels with OctoberCorp or Trustees on *Mardock Scramble 09* cases trying to prove their *usefulness*, it seems that all everyone on the outside does is fight. It's as if you want to give the lawmakers yet another excuse to ban our technology, serve it up on a plate for them," Faceman said.

Faceman pointed to Boiled's gun with his chin. "That's the gun that Oeufcoque used to *turn* into, isn't it? An object whose only *usefulness* is as a tool of destruction. It's also the empty shell of Oeufcoque—the carapace that he molted, if you will. And that's all you have now as a substitute for a soul—a substitute for Oeufcoque."

Boiled was about to open his mouth but said nothing. His words were swallowed up by the annihilation that he exuded, turning into so much *nothingness*.

"You're nothing more than a shark who has smelled blood. A shark brimming full of curiosity, searching for the perfect weapon."

Seeing that Boiled had nothing to say, Faceman spoke his final words quietly. "And now art thou cursed from the earth, and a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be… Go then, on to the East of Eden…"

Boiled did just that.

–So, for a wine cellar storing eighteen years' worth of brain tissue, it's quite a fancy little thing…

Tweedledum was muttering to himself. He looked up at Balot, who was now standing beside the edge of the pool, and asked,

–Are you going, then, babe?

He tilted his silver-sunglass-covered face as if to say he'd be lonely without her.

–Yeah…

Balot put her white robe on and knelt down beside Tweedledum to touch his face.

–I think I'd like to come back and swim here again one day.

–Well, if the outside world becomes one with this pool then you'll be able to swim here freely.

Balot gave a small nod.

–If the world ever really does become a kinder place then I will come here.

–Well, that's why you're heading back out into the world, right? To try and make your little piece of it good, at least. But you do know that the moment you step foot out of Paradise you'll officially become a suspect of crimes against the Commonwealth. Don't you regret it?

–No regrets. I'm glad I did what I did.

–Well, break a leg, babe.

Balot kissed Tweedledum's forehead gently.

–Thank you for swimming with me.

Tweedledum cried out, a hollow, beautiful cry.

–Hurry up, now. We've got a rough customer in the building who's kicking up quite a fuss looking for you.

–Thank you.

Balot stood up quickly.

–And all the best with Oeufcoque, Tweedledum said, and she smiled at him one last time before running off, still barefoot.

Balot left the forest, leaving Tweedledum there in silence.

Before long a mass of icy death emerged from another corner of the forest.

–The angel has already flown the nest, big guy, Tweedledum informed him. He had *snarced* the PA system around the pool.

"Tweedledum, is it…" Boiled muttered, pointing his gun at the dolphin.

–You know that as a Living Unit I'm considered a vital component of this information terminal, right? You kill me, big guy, and it'll be seen as a serious act of sabotage against this here system. The Commonwealth Government has thrown bucketloads of cash at this thing. You want to end up an outlaw?

"What was she investigating here?" He pulled the trigger back, noisily. Tweedledum just gave a short peep, as if he were laughing.

–Why don't you ask your own employer? Or is he the sort of boss who doesn't tell you anything?

The gunpoint erupted in flame, and one of the poolside speakers was blown into small pieces.

–Hey, big guy, why are you trying to stop me from speaking?

Tweedledum's voice emerged from a different speaker, sounding very unimpressed.

–You know that the person you're here to see will have left the facility shortly? Once your suspect has left, your jurisdiction'll be revoked and you'll only have the same privileges as an ordinary Joe. You'll be violating the law just by being here, big guy.

"You've learned to talk the talk, Tweedledum." Boiled lowered his gun. "In any case, we'll now be able to put in an official request for full disclosure based on the fact that Rune-Balot was here."

–Yeah, but the girl will have solved the case by then. With her Oeufcoque.

"*My* Oeufcoque. I'll hold him in my hand again before long."

–Hmm… A love triangle, eh? Tweedledum responded, somewhat taken aback.

Boiled now had no eyes for Tweedledum. He scanned the area quickly before correctly sniffing out the path that Balot had taken. He started heading down that way himself.

–Truth be told, big guy, I was surprised when I heard what you did to them sharks. "The Rusty Gun is pretty keen to prove his usefulness*," I thought.*

Boiled stopped for a second and looked back at Tweedledum. But he said nothing and soon disappeared into the forest.

–Oops. That didn't end up buying them much time, did it…

Tweedledum sighed as he watched the figure disappear.

≡

The silver egg was floating above the rooftop of the facility.

Activated by the Doctor's voiceprint and key card, the shell cracked open to form a gangway. The Doctor was loading a giant capsule into the egg with a pushcart when he saw Balot running toward him, out of breath. "Barefoot, eh?" he asked, eyes wide open in surprise.

Balot *snarced* the stereo system of the Humpty-Dumpty.

–I was in a hurry.

"Sure, but are you all right? What if you stepped on something rusty and got tetanus?"

–I'm all right. And even if I did get something, I'd have you fix me up in no time, Doctor.

"Right…" The Doctor nodded meekly, before asking somewhat hesitantly, "So, uh, how did it all go…"

–I found it. The hiding place for that man's past.

"Have you, now?" The Doctor nodded, visibly relieved, but he still looked apprehensive. "But I've thought about it, and I can't have you become a Commonwealth outlaw. Oeufcoque would be furious with me."

–All that's happened is that I'm now on equal footing with you guys. With Oeufcoque, Balot answered back, primly. There was an unusually wide grin on her face.

Something called out to her.

–You're going, are you?

The stereo broadcast in a different voice.

Balot turned around to see the solitary figure of Tweedledee. Both she and the Doctor looked on in horror at his puffed-up face and the dressings that covered the space where his hands once were.

–Oh, don't worry about this. I just got a little frisky, thinking I might try and experience some pain for a change. Also, something like this needed to happen in order to trigger security. But I'll be fixed up in no time.

–I'm so sorry. It's all because of me.

–Really, it's fine. If this is what it takes to become your friend then it's worth it.

Balot seemed shocked when she heard this, but then she nodded.

–Thank you—I'm glad to have you as a friend.

Tweedledee smiled sweetly.

–So long, Balot. You can't write me or email, but it'd be nice to meet again one day.

Before long the Humpty-Dumpty was in the air, and the opening in the shell wall was closing.

Tweedledee watched the silver egg as it rose into the empty air. Suddenly a large man appeared on the rooftop behind him.

Balot started when she saw him. The Doctor was startled as well.

Boiled lifted his gun up at the Humpty-Dumpty.

"Stop it—do you really want to become an outlaw from the Commonwe—" The rest of the Doctor's sentence was obliterated by the gunshot.

The bullet smashed into the shell wall right beside Balot, scattering a shower of sparks every which way.

The shell wall was strong enough to withstand a direct hit from a missile. A bullet would never pierce it. Balot knew this, and Boiled knew this.

"He fired…" the Doctor muttered in amazement.

This was Boiled's new declaration of war.

Now Boiled—just like Balot—was a potential suspect of crimes against the Commonwealth, and everything would come down to how each of them went about solving their case.

Boiled held his fire. He just kept his gun trained on the silver egg as if in acknowledgement of the fact that the only way to solve this case now was to take Balot's life.

Balot raised her left hand toward the very same Boiled.

She pointed her index finger at him and raised her thumb—and mimed a gunshot back at Boiled for him to see clearly.

I won't be killed a second time—I'll fight back.

Even without speaking, her message was loud and clear.

The shell wall closed tight, obscuring Balot from view.

The Humpty-Dumpty sped up and rose high into the sky.

Boiled watched its ascent with cold, dusky eyes and an upturned mouth.

–Are you smiling*, Boiled?* Tweedledee spoke, *snarcing* the speakers embedded in the rooftop.

"What…?"

–You're smiling. The sort of smile you get when you've just made a new friend.

Tweedledee grinned himself.

Wordlessly Boiled returned his gun to his breast pocket and turned around. By the time his back was to Tweedledee, his face was devoid of emotion again.

–See you around, Boiled. Drop in anytime you like.

Tweedledee felt a twinge of loneliness as he watched him go.

05

The capsule that the Doctor had brought on board was filled with a blue liquid.

Oeufcoque slept inside it, bound hand and foot by a number of cords and *folded into layers*.

The capsule was placed in the bedroom on the first floor. Touching the glass window in the metal piping, Balot thought about Oeufcoque's death. About what Tweedledee had told her. How this complicated synthesis of flesh and metal would eventually grow bloated and die, crushed under its own body weight.

She thought about how Oeufcoque might consider his own inevitable death and tried to see if she could comprehend it in the same way. She thought of the words that he had once said to her. That he was *burnt out* and projecting his world-weariness onto the city.

The Doctor knocked on the open bedroom door. "I've just made some fresh coffee."

Balot pulled away from the capsule and accompanied the Doctor back to the dining room.

"We're at an altitude of 18,000 feet. Just offshore from the city. Aren't you cold?"

Balot shook her head and took the cup that was offered.

It was café au lait. She took a sip and *snarced* the satellite TV to communicate.

–It's good.

"I'm glad."

–I've never really thought that coffee tasted good until now.

"Ah, there's a certain skill to grinding the beans and boiling coffee properly, you see. A bit like preparing a test tube." The Doctor mimed dispensing some medicine.

Balot glared at him.

–Suddenly it doesn't taste so good anymore.

"You are a cruel one," the Doctor grumbled. Balot laughed and drank her coffee. Then she sensed that the Doctor was about to tell her something.

He was about to explain their next course of action, she realized.

–Is there going to be another trial? Balot asked. The Doctor shrugged his shoulders and fell back into his usual habit of pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

"There's not much point in another trial at the moment. Not until we understand *exactly* what's behind their movements and we're ready to move in for the checkmate. As things stand, if we were to make our move now they'd be able to get themselves off the hook one way or another."

–Their movements? What do you mean?

The Doctor seemed relieved that Balot was jumping into the conversation. "The wedding."

–Huh?

"That is to say—he's getting hitched to this woman from the upper classes. We knew he was planning something like this for a while…and now he's finally putting his plan into action.

–Shell's getting married?

"Uh, yeah, that's about it." The Doctor spoke as if he had a bitter taste in his mouth. Balot couldn't have cared less about this news, but it seemed like the Doctor was expecting her to react, so she thought she'd better say something.

–Will you tell me about it?

"Sure. I hope this isn't too hard for you. Basically, Shell is asking for the hand of one of

OctoberCorp's director's daughters. Using the data on his dodgy dealings as a pretext."

–That doesn't make much sense. What's that got to do with marriage?

"Well, uh, exactly, that's the point. There's a reason why the director in question can't refuse Shell's request. Or rather, maybe better to say that he doesn't *need* to refuse."

–I still don't understand. What do you mean?

"It seems that the woman he wants to marry is mentally handicapped." The Doctor seemed troubled. Balot's eyes opened wide.

"The whole household is full of distinguished individuals—other than the woman. She's been confined indoors all her life, apparently. A matter of keeping up appearances. Such an old-fashioned way of thinking. Deplorable, really. They knew about her condition long before she was born—and before you ask why the mother didn't have an abortion, the answer is *because their faith didn't permit it*. But really it wasn't about faith at all, just about saving face. They had to take into consideration all their political affiliations—what their supporters would think, that sort of thing. Now, I don't know how Shell got hold of all this, but he did. He learned about the girl's existence and said something to the effect of 'I'll take care of her if you take care of me'—in other words, make sure he's treated as one of the family with all the social benefits this entails. With the unspoken threat left dangling there that if the father didn't allow the marriage then Shell would reveal the girl's existence to the outside world. How the family has treated her, all sorts of things they wouldn't want seeing the light of day."

Balot put her cup down on the table quietly.

–I feel like killing them.

She didn't say who, but it was quite clear: *anyone and everyone*.

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders as if to say *Me too*. Then, apropos of nothing, he changed the subject somewhat drastically. "I told you that I split up from my wife, didn't I?"

–Uh-huh?

"I have a daughter. A little younger than you, I seem to remember."

Balot was genuinely surprised. The Doctor gave a wry smile. "I'm not sure if that's the reason, but part of me is starting to think of you as a daughter. I can even feel your deep personal hatred toward Shell. The thing is, I don't think my feelings are very healthy."

–I don't understand. What's wrong with them?

"Doesn't it make you feel uncomfortable? When I tell you that I feel that way?"

–Not really—I don't think of you like my father.

"Well, uh, I'm sure you don't. It's just that I'm kind of acting out of self-interest when I'm guiding you toward your next step. I just thought you might feel a bit uncomfortable if, on top of that, I started imposing some sort of unwanted paternal affection on you…"

–I'd feel* very *uncomfortable. Balot gave him a serious look. *Uh*...the Doctor was clearly flustered by her uncompromising answer, but Balot smiled a little to try and reassure him.

–But I am very grateful to you. And I really want to help you. For my own sake too.

The Doctor nodded. He was showing his own gratitude. "So, what do you want to do? After the case is solved, I'm thinking we do just as you like, really."

–I haven't been able to find an answer to that question. I can't really get my head around the idea of this case ever being over.

She answered truthfully and followed up with a sudden question.

–When is Oeufcoque going to die?

The Doctor was taken aback. "Uh, I've just performed some maintenance tasks on Oeufcoque—it's not like I've euthanized him or anything."

–Tweedledum was saying. Professor Faceman too. That Oeufcoque only really started to think about living when he learned that he was going to die.

"Ah, I get it." The Doctor's face became difficult to read, and he stared into the air. "Five years, worst-case scenario."

His tone was breezy. "That's if we discover a particularly malignant tumor that we can't treat. In reality? I don't know. Double that, or triple? He might even live on for another half a century. It's possible. But—it'll be tough for him."

–Tough?

"His whole body will start swelling up. I'm not just talking about obesity due to extra fatty deposits. No—everything will get bigger: hypercorpulence, it's called. His bones, his muscles, his internal organs—even his eyeballs. He's okay right now because he can distribute his Living Unit across several dimensions, but even now his physical structure is already about the size of the pillow you sleep on. Eventually he'll get to a size where he can't even fit inside this Humpty."

Here the Doctor paused. His hand was now on his mouth, as if he were deep in thought, and after a while he continued. "The real question is not *how long* he's going to live, but *how*. He's made his decision—he wants to prove his *usefulness*. Like me. He doesn't know when he's going to die, but neither do I, and neither do you, for that matter. We don't know *how* we're going to die, either. All we know is that sooner or later we *will* die."

Balot nodded. She thought she understood what the Doctor was talking about.

–I want to stay with him. Can I?

"You can, if you want to, I imagine. Do you mean even after this case is finished?"

–Is the work that you two do here rewarding?

Balot deliberately asked the same sort of question Faceman had asked. But the Doctor didn't respond immediately. After a pause, he stared at Balot's face as if to try and work something out. "I'm content here. So much so that I can't even imagine what else I could do."

–Do you think I could do it too?

"Well, taking into consideration your natural aptitude and all the data we have so far, I don't see any reason why not."

–I remember seeing these boys and girls, younger than me, working at underground Shows. Usually in the kitchen or as wait staff, but occasionally on the stage too, dancing.

"Being a PI is a little different from working a Show, you know. You have to try and find ways of resolving situations where all these burnt-out, morally bankrupt people are fighting it out. It's hard work. And I often feel that all we end up doing is projecting our own world-weary selves onto other people even as we solve our cases."

–Still, I want to try it out. Just as Oeufcoque is trying. I want to try.

"Sheesh, you don't make things easy for me, do you…" the Doctor mumbled, then laughed to try and cover his feelings up. "Look, I can lay out all the bare facts and data in front of you and advise you as to what I think is best, but I can't make your decisions for you. And I'm not sure that I can provide the, uh, best environment for you to develop in. You're probably best off going to school, really…"

–If you want me to study, I will. I'll help you as I study.

The Doctor finally caved, throwing his arms into the air in surrender. "Well, for now let's focus our efforts on solving the case at hand. After all, if we don't get a result soon, all three of us are likely to be *disposed of* by society—we'll be together then, but I don't think that's what you had in mind. So, first we solve the case—and then why not have a proper chat with Oeufcoque after that. Just talking to me is going to give you a pretty one-sided account of our work, after all."

Balot nodded and picked up the coffee cup again.

–I'll learn how to make proper coffee too.

Balot was deadly serious.

The Doctor watched, bemused, as Balot steeled herself to the task of learning what was involved in good coffee.

Balot made the next pot.

≡

There was enough food in the kitchen to last them for a while.

The Doctor and Balot ended up sharing kitchen duties.

"I still can't believe that Boiled—fancy firing at a Humpty! However much he sees himself as our enemy, he didn't have to go so far as risking becoming a felon!" the Doctor grumbled as he tucked into a hamburger.

–That man used to be Oeufcoque's partner, right?

"That's right. He was every bit as accomplished as you are at using him."

–Why did they split up?

The Doctor was momentarily lost for words.

–Is there something you can't tell me? Were they lovers? Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee?

"No, no, nothing like that." The Doctor shook his head hastily. "They were the perfect fighting team. No one could stand up to them. But then, this one time, Boiled went on a rampage."

–You don't mind me asking all this, do you?

The Doctor seemed to be thinking hard. He put his food down. "It's probably no bad thing that you understand what sort of a man Boiled is. So I'll tell you."

Such was the Doctor's preface to what was to come.

"It was about a year ago, on a certain case. A young man—a university student—had been beaten up so badly that he was in a comatose state. The client was the father, and the young man was his eldest son. There were five of them in the family: the father, the mother, the student, and a younger brother and sister. The father ran a factory, but it was up to the hilt in debt. The family's only hope was the eldest son, the student. He was a so-called 'golden boy'—not only did he have a full scholarship to the university, but he worked on the side, bringing in money for the family. He was their main source of income."

–So who attacked him?

"At first we all supposed drug dealers. The student's girlfriend had become hooked on drugs, and the student challenged her dealers, leading to the fight that put him in a coma. Oeufcoque,

Boiled, and I took on the case because we thought that by doing so we might be able to find a drug link back to OctoberCorp and crush their illegal trade that way."

–And then?

"First we honed in on the people who allegedly put the student in the coma. It wasn't too difficult to track them down. It was the group of drug-dealing students, and the university was their turf. But then, something strange happened."

–Something strange?

"The ringleader of the group—another student—suddenly committed suicide. He was drugged up himself. People put it down to something stupid he did while he was out of his head, but it all seemed a little too neat for us, and we figured that something suspicious was going on behind the scenes. Then, about the same time, the comatose student's addict girlfriend went missing. And we discovered that behind the original university drug ring was another, more complex, organization —all part of a scheme to sell OctoberCorp's illegal wares. The police were involved too. It was all one big tangle. And it was pretty difficult to work out who was controlling whom."

–The organization was trying to hide something?

"That's what everyone thought. We tightened the screws on some of the people we managed to track down—they all thought the same thing. But our enemy was *all* people connected to the drug trade, one way or another. And at the core of all this was the original comatose student."

–What do you mean?

"We'd misread the situation. The student wasn't just the victim. He was also the *perpetrator*."

Balot was visibly stunned.

The Doctor furrowed his brow and continued with difficulty. "I told you that the comatose son was the main source of income for his family, right? Well, drugs were the main source of income for *him*. To all outward appearances, the ringleader of the student drug ring was the youth who'd committed suicide. But behind the scenes it was the comatose son who had been running the show. And that wasn't all. It was the son who had gotten his girlfriend addicted in the first place. It's called *fishing*—they tried to collect as many girlfriends as they could, using drugs as bait."

–So who put him in the coma?

"The student who ended up committing suicide *had* punched him. Because of an argument over money, or maybe just because he was on a bad trip. The blow caused him to stumble and fall down a flight of stairs, and he hit his head against the wall at the bottom. The student who hit him was so shocked that he retreated further and further into his drugs until one day he got so high that he decided to dive head-first from a pedestrian bridge onto a busy roadway. The incident was pretty gruesome, and there were cut marks on his arms and legs, so we assumed that somebody had decided to make an example of him. But no, it turned out that it was just a straightforward suicide by an addict who happened to have a history of self-harm."

–That's hard to take in. Who would have suspected that the victim was also the perpetrator?

"Yup, it was hard to take in for us too, and we were working on the case. The police were investigating it as well, and at the same time they were indicting a number of their own for corruption and involvement in the drug ring—it was a great scandal at the time. Some of the police had been keeping the drugs that they had confiscated on raids and selling them off on the sly to the student drug ring, you see. And the student who killed himself was involved in that part of the

operation. Not particularly heavily, though. Everyone just saw him as someone who was *there*."

–So it was one wrong guess after another?

"Well, the comatose student's family had put in a pretty staggering request, you see. In order to pay off the debts of the father's factory, they had to try and wrangle a huge sum of money out of the Broilerhouse in the shape of child welfare reparations. But in reality, the student was just as guilty as he was a victim, and really he was just reaping what he had sown. And the student's family didn't help matters either—his younger brother tracked down one of the other dealers and assaulted *him*. It was pandemonium. Eventually, though, the missing girlfriend re-emerged. It turned out that she had fallen asleep in a car in a drugged-up state and slept for three days solid. It was only when we discovered the girl that we managed to get to the bottom of the case and were finally ready to go about solving it."

–So how* did *you go about solving it?

"In the worst way imaginable."

The Doctor put his hands to his forehead. It was as if all the horrors of the time were flashing right in front of his eyes.

"If the truth were made public, everybody involved in the whole sordid affair stood to lose. We tried to imagine what would have happened, and it went something like this: the student's family would suffer the worst—they'd lose their factory, the younger brother would be arrested for violent and disorderly conduct, and not only that, they'd end up having to *pay out* reparations, never mind receiving them. The whole family would live out the rest of their lives in debt. The police and the Broilerhouse would suffer an embarrassing loss of face, and the university where the whole sordid scene was set would be known forever as 'the drug school.' The drug ring would split up into smaller units, and one of these would eventually rat on their police connections, causing additional scandal. So, you see, we were in a real predicament. If we were to let things slide then the Broilerhouse would do more than rap us on the knuckles—they'd repudiate our *usefulness*, our very reason for existence. So with enemies all around us, or so it seemed, Boiled came up with the worst possible solution to the case. He didn't even tell us what he had planned."

–What did he do?

"He *annihilated*." The Doctor spat the word out as if he were vomiting up an indescribably bitter object. "First, he shot the comatose student."

The Doctor saw Balot's eyes widen but just shrugged his shoulders weakly. "Yes, he killed the very same piece-of-shit student that we were hired by our client to protect in the first place. Then, he found the junkie girlfriend, dragged her back to the car she'd been sleeping in, and shot *her*. After that, he rounded up the students in the university who were involved in the drug ring and killed *them* one by one. Then he went after the ringleaders who were involved behind the scenes and killed every single one of them too. Accurately and swiftly. Oh, and in the process of this he also killed a number of corrupt cops along the way."

–How many people did he kill?

"At that point, eleven."

–With Oeufcoque as the weapon?

"Oeufcoque trusted Boiled completely. He thought that Boiled was acting according to his own directions."

–Oeufcoque's directions?

"When we discovered that the student was at the heart of the drug ring, Oeufcoque said that we should tell his father the truth. Try and get him to drop his claim for reparations. Oeufcoque was just trying to work out what the right thing to do was, until the bitter end. Boiled headed out with Oeufcoque in order to do as Oeufcoque suggested, but along the way Boiled decided that he had a better way to solve the case. For the next forty hours or so, Boiled told Oeufcoque that he was protecting the family from the drug ring, who were now out baying for the family's blood. They went on a killing spree—nearly twenty people in total. Boiled's story wasn't totally unbelievable, as some of the drug ring *were* actually out to get the family."

–How come Oeufcoque never worked out what was really going on?

"Both of Boiled's hands have metal fibers grafted into them for electronic interference, just like your skin grafts," the Doctor said, surprising Balot again. "Not quite as powerful as yours, though. At the time, Oeufcoque wasn't really able to grasp his surroundings after he had *turned*—he didn't need to. So all the main information about his surroundings was fed to him through Boiled's hands. This allowed Oeufcoque to *turn* with the greatest level of precision and speed. It's different now, of course. He has omnidirectional receivers to pick up sights, sounds, and—in particular—smells. He's like a Christmas tree decorated with cameras instead of baubles. Like the compound eyes on insects. Oeufcoque asked for all this after the case had finished. And I obliged his request in order to try and assuage his paranoid neuroses."

Balot nodded. She understood Oeufcoque so well that it hurt.

How it felt to have things done to you when you had no control, no knowledge…

It was a type of hopelessness. No hope in others, and no hope in yourself. She felt pain in her chest. As a victim of violence—*and as a perpetrator of violence.*

–When did Oeufcoque learn what he'd done?

"Long after the family's factory was sold off, and after the family only received one-eighteenth of the reparations they'd originally put in for. When Oeufcoque learned the truth he fell into a trancelike torpor, shut away inside himself. To make matters worse, Boiled killed another two people using Oeufcoque while Oeufcoque was in this state. After that, Oeufcoque never entrusted himself into Boiled's hands again, and Boiled in turn disappeared straight after the double murder. According to rumor he was picked up and recruited straightaway by OctoberCorp's scouts."

The Doctor sighed, remembering the past. "At one point it seemed as if Oeufcoque and Boiled might end up killing each other. I even wondered to myself whether I'd made the right decision in choosing *Scramble 09*. But… I didn't want it to end like that. Oeufcoque and I have since acted as Trustees on a number of cases to try and recover our credibility as PIs. Boiled is Boiled, and has ended up on the opposite side of the fence to us in order to prove that he didn't make the wrong choice, that his solution was the best. And the result of all this is that here we are again, happy families, with our guns rammed down one another's throats."

The Doctor took a sip of his coffee to try and wash the bitterness in his mouth away.

–Thank you for sharing all that with me.

"Don't mention it."

–Why does Boiled kill so many people, do you think?

"The last bit of stability he had in his life was his military training. Killing is probably the only way he can cope with the great emptiness he now feels. The sense of *nothingness* that he carries around with him isn't your everyday stress and strain, after all…"

–That man wanted Oeufcoque.

"I'm sure he did. Oeufcoque is the only handheld Living Unit in the world. He's the ultimate hand-to-hand weapon."

–I think I can empathize with Boiled a little, though.

The Doctor choked on his mouth full of coffee. "You're not saying that you want to become a PI so that you can turn into the ultimate killing machine?"

–No…but I still understand Boiled a little, I think. Because I was like that, for a while. I raped Oeufcoque. He became a sacrifice to my own burnt-out moral bankruptcy. And I think Boiled was the same. It's hard to give that up when you're on your own.

"You're different from him, though," said the Doctor. But the truth was that the Doctor knew that everybody had it in them to turn into another Boiled. To arrive at a state where the only way to wash away your dark and hollow sensation of world-weariness was to see yourself as a monster and act accordingly…

–Do you think Oeufcoque will ever be able to forgive me?

"There's nothing really to forgive…" The Doctor caught Balot's eyes and nodded neatly. "You'll be fine. You'll learn, you'll reflect on your actions, and you'll grow. Oeufcoque understands that all too well."

Balot nodded too. Both Oeufcoque and the Doctor were very kind people.

But she didn't want to start relying on that kindness—she suppressed any feelings in her that suggested she might. She was too embarrassed to rely on other people anymore.

She needed to think for herself, decide what her best course of action might be and act on it.

"Oh, by the way… Do you mind if I ask you something in return?"

–What?

"To do with Shell's hidden memories…" The Doctor seemed awfully reluctant all of a sudden, as if he were terrified of imposing on her.

Balot put her hand to her mouth.

–I'm sorry. I'd completely forgotten.

She was speaking the truth.

Then she blurted out:

–Chips.

"Chips…?"

–One of Shell's casinos is called Eggnog Blue. They have chips worth a million dollars each there, and he's hidden these special media storage devices inside them.

"A million-dollar casino chip, eh? Well, well…a hidden treasure-within-a-treasure, huh?" The Doctor looked at Balot, full of admiration. "Well done, a great spot. You're really quite something."

–Tweedledum helped me. I never would have been able to work it out on my own. There's a strict ban on taking the chips out of the casino, and other than at the big Shows the punters rarely get a chance to see them.

"They're probably there as a way for other companies in the OctoberCorp group to secrete away some of their accumulated funds. They deposit a million dollars in the casino as a way of laundering money. At the same time, it's great for the casino as the chip becomes an ostentatious sign that the casino has funds in reserve."

–Yup. It looks like they were doing exactly as you say, Doctor.

"But to go out of your way to hide your memories in *there*…"

–I looked at the production records for the chips, and there were traces of evidence that they had been made specially. The records themselves had been deleted, but there were still fragments of data flying around, so I reconstructed them.

"Amazing. I know you had the might of all of Paradise's facilities behind you, and Tweedledum's support, but even so it's pretty incredible that you managed all that in just a few hours."

–I wouldn't mind trying it again sometime.

Balot laughed as she spoke. The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Violation of Commonwealth law and aggravated hacking—you're looking at up to twenty years in prison. If you don't play your cards right you won't be able to go near another computer for almost half a century, either. So just do me one small favor, will you—don't go near that thing again unless *absolutely* necessary."

–I'm sorry.

Balot seemed to grow smaller. She'd been told off for something similar by Oeufcoque not that long ago, and here she was doing it again. She needed to wield her power from a state of *readiness*. She was done with abusing power. She felt truly ashamed.

"No, don't feel sorry. It just means that, in reality, you've taken a whole load of risk upon yourself, and you need to be ready for that. So, back to those million-dollar chips—how many of them are there?"

–Twelve in the whole casino.

"That's quite a lot…all containing Shell's memories?"

–No, just four of them. The ones that have the OctoberCorp company emblem stamped on them. They're made by special order.

"I see…"

–What are we going to do? Steal them?

She was half joking, but—

"Robbing a casino is just as tricky as robbing a bank, you see. Burglary should be our last resort."

Balot was a little surprised that the Doctor took her question seriously.

"We could ask the DA to conduct an official investigation, but once Shell works out what we're up to it'll be too easy for him to palm his chips off somewhere else. And if Shell warns OctoberCorp, we'll be letting the big fish get away. We need to move carefully. Let's see if we can be granted special search privileges—but no…" The Doctor muttered to himself in this vein for a while.

Then, all of a sudden, "Hmm. I think the best thing for starters is to head on in as if we're ordinary punters." He grinned at Balot. It was somewhat disconcerting—almost as if he were raring to go, looking forward to the prospect.

"Balot… I'm going to ask Oeufcoque too. I think he will agree with my decision, but—"

–Yes? What?

"Have you ever played at a casino before?"

–No. I've been inside them with men, but I always just stood next to the man as he played.

"Do you know the rules to poker and roulette? What about blackjack or baccarat?"

–Um… I know the rules to snap?

"Lesson number two, then," said the Doctor. "As soon as Apprentice Private Investigator Ms. Rune-Balot learns how to brew a proper cup of coffee, it'll be time for her to move on to her next object of study, methinks. How about it, young lady?"

–Can I ask you something?

"What is it?"

–Do you like gambling, Doctor?

The Doctor flexed his fingers. He tried to wear a solemn expression, but he couldn't prevent a wide smile from breaking out across his face.

"Let me see. Gambling is the ultimate thrill—a game of intellect, but also aesthetics. It's the most beautiful thing in the world."

Balot was not convinced.

Chapter 7

ROTOR

01

Balot was close to tears.

As a result, she didn't even notice that Oeufcoque had woken up and that his capsule was open.

Such was the intensity of the Doctor's training program. On gambling.

The basics she learned from the legal eCasinos, and she was introduced to all sorts of games.

The eCasinos had their own individual variations on the rules, and Balot learned about the various discrepancies. Everything was reinforced further through a number of practice hands with the Doctor. Blackjack, baccarat, poker, high-ball, low-ball, high-low split. On top of that, she also learned the ins and outs of wheel of fortune, roulette, and the slot machines.

So far so good. But this was where the Doctor's lecture really started.

"Right." The Doctor started writing on a blank form, gleefully scribbling down some formulae and drawing up a table. "Let's talk game theory. As we have seen, with a finite game it's possible to express everything in normal-form. For a finite zero-sum game, we represent everything in normal-form and then work out what sort of strategy the other players are likely to employ—this would seem the logical way to approach things. So, let's examine the logical criteria and try and work out where the game's *equilibrium* lies."

Creases appeared above Balot's eyebrows, and she nodded. The Doctor was trying to teach her something. How to win at gambling. The problem was that she had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. Still, she listened as best she could.

"So, let's express this normal-form game as a payoff matrix. We assign the numbers 1 to *n* to your various strategies, and on the other side we do the same for my strategies. This way we can clearly demonstrate through the matrix how *your* decision influences *my* payoff, and vice versa. Logically, each player should take the action that maximizes his potential payoff. In other words, you can think about all sorts of possible moves, but in the end the matrix will reveal your optimal strategy. This is what we call equilibrium analysis."

As the Doctor spoke he wrote down a list of letters of the alphabet. Letters with numbers beside them. The plus and minus symbols were fine, easy enough to follow. But then all sorts of other symbols started appearing, and Balot soon lost track of what they meant, or whether the letters meant anything or whether they were code for something else…

"But what happens when the players have the opportunity to cooperate? Let's take a look at so-called cooperative games. The theory is simple. The player's obvious strategy will be to choose one of a number of finite moves, taking into consideration the logical move that the other player is likely to make so that they can optimize their mutual payoff."

Balot was starting to feel that the Doctor was becoming ever-so-slightly ostentatious in his display of knowledge. But she kept at it, listening as intently as she could.

"So, if we take a subset from our payoff matrix and apply this procedure to it then we can see that the outcome is going to be different when collusion is involved—that's what a cooperative game means. It's a so-called special function: you pass the variable *n* to the collaborator, and that special function is then fixed on a unique value."

Balot watched the swarm of symbols as they emerged from the Doctor's hand, and wondered how much of this it would ever be possible for her to learn. She hoped that she would at least be

able to understand something of his final conclusion when he did arrive at it, but at the moment she didn't even know how to look out for that.

As this was going on, Oeufcoque was inside his capsule, waiting for the liquid to evaporate. Once it had, he *turned* back into his customary shape of a golden mouse and struggled his way out of the capsule.

He landed on the bed and *turned* part of his fur inside out to make a pair of his usual pants. Then he pottered off toward the sound of conversation.

Sheets of paper covered in numerical formulae were littered about the floor, and Oeufcoque stepped over these, looking at the numbers as he passed them. Before long he arrived at the scene of the crime and the source of the paper.

Oeufcoque sniffed the air, as if something were burning, and sighed deeply. He passed under the Doctor, who was in the middle of another animated explanation, and hopped onto the table via the chair.

"What are you hoping to achieve by throwing a whole load of economic theory at a fifteen-year-old girl, Doctor?" said Oeufcoque. The Doctor and Balot raised their heads simultaneously. "This might be your field of expertise, Doc, but try not to lord it over the girl too much—you'll give her an inferiority complex. And Balot—you don't have to put up with this, you know. Don't be a martyr. What are you trying to do—experience the prisoner's dilemma with your own body?"

Having rebuked them both, Oeufcoque sat down on top of the sheets of paper that covered the tabletop.

"Greetings, Oeufcoque. You're awake earlier than I expected. The latest technology from Paradise seems to have come on a bit since we were last there."

Oeufcoque shrugged his shoulders. "So, what's been going on?"

The Doctor brought him up to date, explaining what Balot had discovered while she was at Paradise and the conclusions that they had come to. All through the Doctor's exposition, Balot's eyes were cast down. She was terribly nervous. Oeufcoque was in easy reaching distance, but she couldn't even turn to face him.

"Well, putting aside the fact that Balot is now a suspect for crimes against the Commonwealth —a fact that we'll revisit later, Doctor, don't think I'm letting *that* one pass—surely there's a better way of preparing Balot for certain victory at the gaming table than to throw a whole load of numbers at her? Isn't that right, Balot?"

Balot's body jolted.

Oeufcoque and the Doctor looked at her in mild surprise. Balot tried to answer. Something casual. But the words just wouldn't come forth.

Balot just sat there staring at the table, trying to make herself seem as small as possible, retreating into herself.

Oeufcoque and the Doctor let her be. There were no forceful reproaches, no *What do you want?* or *If you have something to say then say it*.

"I hope you'll find it in yourself to forgive me," Oeufcoque said suddenly. "For sleeping through the worst of it, while you were making difficult choices."

Hurriedly, Balot shook her head.

The Doctor asked Oeufcoque a question, as if to reassure Balot. "How are you doing now,

Oeufcoque?"

"I probably shouldn't strain myself by *turning* too vigorously, but if it's just a matter of helping Balot learn to win at cards then I'm well up for it."

Then Oeufcoque walked over to Balot so that he stood right in front of her eyes. "Would you mind if I hopped on your shoulder?"

Balot stared at Oeufcoque. Her vision started to blur. She nodded, and tears started to fall. She covered her face with both hands, and Oeufcoque reached out to touch her with his paw.

"I'll put the coffee on." The Doctor rose from his seat.

Timidly, Balot opened her hands and extended one of them to Oeufcoque.

–Can I touch you?

"Sure." Oeufcoque jumped onto Balot's palm. Balot lifted Oeufcoque up, brushing him against her face before placing him on her shoulder.

–Will you stay by my side? Just for now?

"Of course."

–I'm so sorry, Oeufcoque.

"I'm fine."

There were no more words. Balot was doing everything she could to suppress the turbulent emotions that were now bubbling up inside her, and she was desperately trying to stop herself from involuntarily *snarcing* them to Oeufcoque.

The Doctor returned and laid the cups of coffee out neatly. There was even a tiny cup for Oeufcoque. The Doctor and Oeufcoque waited patiently for Balot to regain her composure.

After that, they made their plans. They decided who was going to play what role, and how best to act.

They went through every possible scenario they could imagine, and the Doctor agreed to synthesize it all into one master plan.

When that was over, Balot prepared dinner. They all sat around the table, making small talk. About what they were going to do next. After this case was solved.

No one said anything decisive, of course. No details—just vague generalizations, half jesting. They were all getting along with each other again, on the same wavelength. That was enough for now.

After dinner, the Doctor stood up with his plate in his hands. "Well, it seems our preparations are complete."

Oeufcoque smiled, but solemnly. "We'll win our case yet."

Balot wanted to add something but couldn't think of anything, so she just nodded.

Balot had been assigned a private room on the second floor, and as she settled into her bed there, Oeufcoque spoke to her. "Shall I stay by your side until you fall asleep?" He was hanging upside down from the pull-switch of the night lamp.

–I'll be all right.

Balot leaned over to touch Oeufcoque.

–Thank you.

And that was all she had to say. Not only that, she realized that this was all she had wanted to say, right from the beginning.

Oeufcoque pulled the light switch to turn the lamp off, left the room, and shut the door gently

behind him.

In the darkness Balot cried, but just a little.

As she cried, she thought. About *progress*. Oeufcoque and the Doctor both looked to the future. They stood for progress—they defined themselves by fighting against vague and equivocal values and targets. They aimed for tangible results.

But Shell and Boiled were different. *They've turned their backs on progress,* she thought. They had spun themselves around, so that each stared at his own past even though it was supposed to have been long since dead.

The past was just a skeleton, and you could do what you liked with it.

That is, provided that you had come to terms with it, given it a proper burial. So Balot thought.

But even if the past were firmly buried in its grave, it was still looking back up at you, and all it took was a small crack to emerge in the sod and the past could thrust a half-rotten arm right up toward you. And when the hand of the past grabbed hold of your leg and tried to drag you down, you could end up losing sight of where you were even heading in the first place.

When the gaze of the past boring into their backs became too much for Shell and Boiled, they turned around to face it and were swallowed up by the darkness.

The same darkness that Balot knew *she* could be swallowed by at any moment.

Balot considered what she could do.

When she left this silver egg, what exactly *would* she be able to do?

Eventually her tears subsided, and Balot fell asleep.

≡

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" Oeufcoque jumped onto the chair and then up onto the kitchen table.

"What's this, now?" The Doctor had been gleefully sorting their plans out on the table, and now he turned to look at Oeufcoque, a little fed up.

"The *gifts* that we gave to the girl…they've put her in a real dilemma."

"You mean the plan of action that she's chosen? The plan derives from her own consciousness, you know!"

"Yes, but you can't say for sure that her latent desire for revenge hasn't unduly influenced her subconscious mind."

"You may be right, but it's not as if she's burning with the need for revenge at the moment, is it?" asked the Doctor.

"Hmm…no. I think she's humbly putting her mind to the task at hand—solving this case."

"Then I think she'll be all right. Besides, if Balot hadn't chosen the path of *Scramble 09* and had just been relying on the Ham & Eggers, by now she'd be in little strips, being sold off down at the marketplace."

"Marketplace?" said Oeufcoque.

"Intelligence from the police that's just come in. About the assassins Boiled hired. They were well known among the human-body-part-fetishist community, apparently. They sold off *quality*

body parts."

"Hmm."

"They're the ones who deserved to be torn limb from limb. I think so, anyway, and I'm sure Balot thinks so too. But Balot doesn't consider it to be our *job* to do so. She doesn't *have* to tear them limb from limb to be satisfied or achieve closure. That's a good thing, surely? That's not to say I'm pleased that our old hideaway is now in ruins, of course. But even that can be fixed up one way or another with reparations from the Broilerhouse when we manage to solve this case properly."

"That's true, I suppose."

"I also feel that we definitely did the right thing in strengthening the girl. As per usual, someone had been systematically tampering with the Ham & Egg circuits. An inside job, most probably—a mole taking money to look the other way, not caring in the slightest whether the people bribing them were murderers or fetishists," said the Doctor.

"So what's happening about the inside man?"

"The police are on the case there—it's out of our hands. You're looking at serious money to try and bail out someone involved in hacking a public network. I'm sure there are plenty of police looking to their next bonus, eager to pin down the mole."

Still, Oeufcoque didn't seem entirely satisfied, and he remained sitting on the table.

"Talk about wishy-washy, Oeufcoque. Anyway, what do *you* think?"

"About what?"

"The girl, of course."

Oeufcoque scratched his head with his small paws. "I really hope that her reason and ambitions will triumph over her negative impulses. That's her *real* job, to make sure that this happens. *Our* job is to give her room to develop by protecting her from harm and helping her to recover all her legal rights and privileges. It may be that this sort of work is what I was looking for all along."

"You see yourself as a social worker? If you can't stand the heat you can always get out of the kitchen. Just find another line of work," said the Doctor.

"No—overdependency on social welfare can lead to lives being snuffed out in an instant. The Broilerhouse always overcomplicates things, and they will always need PIs to solve their cases, one way or another. I want to be *useful* as a deterrent against an everlasting cycle of violence, to protect lives. *That's* what *Scramble 09* is for."

"Then what *exactly* is your problem?"

"I'm not comfortable with the idea of forcing the girl to use me as a weapon, even with the threat of a clear and present danger…"

"And that's why we're looking for a chink in the enemy's armor—to help us solve this case in the quietest way possible. What's wrong with that?"

"Doctor, I'm a living tool, and you'll never really understand me."

"Huh?"

"I'm constantly on the lookout for a *user*. I *want* someone like Balot to be using me. I had thought that I'd never again be able to entrust myself to someone else's hand completely…"

"So?"

"I'm disturbed by the fact that the girl wants to become a PI after we've solved this case."

"Well, I'm glad of that." The Doctor took his eyes off Oeufcoque for a moment, sipping his

coffee.

"What's there to be glad about, Doctor?"

"Have you heard of the marriage blues, Oeufcoque?"

"No, what are they?"

"They're when you wear yourself out worrying about something that you've already decided. Obsessing about things like self-centered emotions, whether you're feeling all right, whether something is inevitable or whether it's happenstance."

"Are you saying that I've got the marriage blues?"

"I think that would be a pretty astute diagnosis, though I do say so myself."

"What's the cure?"

"Patience. You just wait to see how events unfold."

Oeufcoque looked the other way and exhaled silently. "That's a tough one."

"Well, it's a problem that's been plaguing us since the beginning of history, so you're in good company. Just do your best."

The Doctor poked Oeufcoque's shoulder. He wasn't particularly encouraging.

02

Dawn was just about to break when the giant silver egg landed on the rooftop of the Broilerhouse.

Bathed in the purple glow of sunrise, the Floating Residence known as the Humpty-Dumpty stopped in midair at a point precisely one meter above the rooftop, and a crack opened up on one side. The crack turned into a number of symmetric hexagonal openings, and part of the shell that had opened up now transformed into a ramp that extended down to the roof.

The Doctor and Balot stepped out onto the ramp.

The wind was strong, and the three-ply metal fencing that surrounded the rooftop was rattling.

Balot headed into the building and called up an elevator. Not by *snarcing* it, but by pressing the call button.

The Doctor sent the Humpty back up into the sky, then followed after Balot in great strides. "Right, let's go." He leapt into the elevator. "We have to be low-profile from here on out. Well, relatively speaking."

He was in a sprightly mood. The cheeriest Balot had ever seen. He was dragging a large trunk behind him, and Balot had a bag hanging from her shoulder.

"You're in high spirits, Doc," Oeufcoque observed, as a choker around Balot's neck. His tone of voice was, unusually for him, relaxed—lazy, even.

"Bring it on! Literally and metaphorically, I mean. I'm not about to pass up the opportunity to make some noise—it's taken long enough to talk you into gambling. Let's head on in with the mindset that we're going to break the bank."

"Sure, but our aim isn't actually to bankrupt Shell, you know." As Oeufcoque spoke, the fabric of the choker warped around the edges. He seemed to be yawning. This tickled Balot's neck, and she gave an involuntary squirm of the shoulders.

"I'm not a morning person. It brings out my true nature," Oeufcoque blurted out, and the elevator had arrived.

They were in the first-floor lobby, where they could see various justice department officials heading this way and that. Many of them stayed in the building overnight, and a large group of people had congregated in the cafeteria for their morning dose of coffee. Balot and the Doctor left the building through the lobby and hailed a taxi.

The taxi drove off and headed uptown. During the ride, the Doctor referred to his PDA incessantly, humming a jaunty tune as he did so. A list of numbers was scrolling across the display, and these caused the Doctor to smile, as if he were looking at the figures of a particularly healthy bank balance.

Before long the taxi pulled up at a motel. An airport motel.

They entered the lobby to find that their rooms were ready, rooms that the Doctor had reserved using the Humpty's NetService. The Doctor and Balot went into their adjoining rooms, as if they had just arrived by air and were about to head into the big city later. Well, they *had* just been flying, of course, but not in the manner that a casual observer would have assumed.

Their bags contained mostly clothes. Once she was in her room, Balot took a dress from her bag. She'd had Oeufcoque make it for her based on pictures from an online catalog. She brushed it

down and hung it up neatly on a hanger before taking some shoes and accessories out of the bag and lining them up on the motel desk.

As she was making her preparations, the choker undid itself. It *turned* inside out in midair, then settled on the shape of a golden mouse, who landed on the desk on two feet before yawning properly.

"We've still got plenty of time yet. I'd like to take a nap." Not waiting for an answer from Balot, Oeufcoque jumped off the desk. He headed straight for the bed, jumped onto the pillow, and rolled over.

Balot followed him to the bed and poked him in his tummy.

–I've never seen you act so* slovenly *before.

She *snarced* him and laughed.

Oeufcoque shrugged his shoulders. *Whatever*, he seemed to say. He rolled over, face-up like a human, crossed his arms over his stomach, and stretched his legs out leisurely. Before long he was snoring gently.

Balot gazed at him and thought that he probably did need the sleep—he hadn't yet recovered completely from his injuries. She decided to leave him alone and took a shower. Then she lay down to study the game rules the Doctor had given her, and before long she found herself feeling sleepy too. The time was just then six thirty. Balot snuggled under the covers next to Oeufcoque, whom she could sense beside her, scratching his belly. She was asleep in no time.

It was almost noon when she was awoken by a call from the Doctor. Oeufcoque was already awake and watching television. On mute—picture only. When she asked him if he could follow what was going on, he replied, "I'm practicing my lip reading."

What a strange hobby, she thought for a moment, but of course he wasn't doing it for fun. "It's a good warm-up exercise for the job we're about to go on," Oeufcoque said, and he stepped down on the remote with a tiny foot to turn the picture off.

The two of them headed down to the motel restaurant, where the Doctor was waiting for them. There they had a meal and made their final arrangements. They reconfirmed their next course of action. Then there was a little test. Did Balot understand all the rules for all the main games? The rules themselves were fairly simple. They hadn't targeted any of the more complicated games in the first place. The problem was that rules always ended up producing winners and losers.

–How much do we need to win? Balot asked, *snarcing* her Oeufcoque-choker.

The Doctor pursed his lips and pushed his glasses up. "We need to turn two thousand dollars into four million."

It sounded like a wild dream. But the Doctor just shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I think you'll understand once you actually start playing. The question is, how to find a way of winning *for sure*. If we can't work one out then we'll have to abandon the plan."

–Do you really think we have a chance?

"So, uh, it's not impossible, at least. It's not as if we're actually trying to *make* the money. All you have to do is make contact with the chips while sticking to the rules of the casino—do that and we've won. The regular punters are there to try and win themselves some money and experience the thrills of the casino, *that's* why they handle the chips. What *we* want to handle is the golden yoke that's hidden inside the chips. Without necessarily having to get the shell or egg white in the process…"

–How much money is a million dollars?

The Doctor paused to think. "Let's see…"

"Don't think of it as money." Oeufcoque interrupted them in a small voice that only Balot and the Doctor could hear.

–What do you mean?

"He means that the chips we're going after just happen to be worth four million dollars, and that's what we're calling them, but they're really just chips to us. It's not as if we're actually going in there to try and win their cash from them. *That's* why we might be able to breach their defenses, and it's also why I feel that I can help with this plan. Also, even if our plan fails, as long as you've worked out the location of the chips, we could always try stealing them at a later date—although if Shell figures out what we're up to we'll struggle to find them before the trial is over. So we're taking a big gamble before we even set foot in the casino. In other words, the time is now. This is our last real chance, and also our best," said the Doctor.

Balot looked at the Doctor's face as she answered,

–I understand. If the two of you think that we can do it, then I do too.

She was speaking the truth.

The Doctor smiled affectionately and opened up his PDA. "Right, time to get this plan on the road." Much to Balot's surprise he erased the memory on his PDA as he spoke. It was supposed to have contained all sorts of vital data. Who worked where, what they did, how the money came in, everything. Balot was shocked to see that all this had now been reduced to a blank screen.

"If we have all the info on us at the point that the casino starts taking an interest in us, we'd be thrown out the moment they discovered it. Not only that, they'd contact all the other casinos in the city on the spot. With our photographs. We'd never be able to set foot inside a casino again." The Doctor's face revealed that he considered this to be a fate worse than death.

–Will we be all right without it?

"If it comes to the crunch, all the data is still inside Oeufcoque. There's no cause for concern."

Suddenly the Doctor's brow creased. "By the way, have you decided what you'll call me?" he asked.

Balot looked a little troubled and shook her head.

"Well, why not try something out."

–Brother?

She burst out laughing even before she finished the word.

"No good, I suppose," the Doctor said, his face most serious. "How about Daddy?"

This time it was Balot who furrowed her brow.

–That doesn't feel natural. No good.

"Hmm."

–Uncle.

"You mean…?"

–It'll be fine. I don't thing there will be any misunderstandings.

"Fine. Henceforth I shall be known as your Uncle Easter."

Balot couldn't stop herself from bursting out laughing again, her shoulders shaking. She saw the Doctor looking discouraged and nodded her assent through her wordless laughter.

–Uncle Easter.

She repeated. The Doctor nodded too.

"It's decided, then."

Balot laughed again. But actually the term didn't feel all that out of place. She looked at the Doctor and mimed combing her hair down. As if to say *Sort yourself out.*

–Could you at least dye all your hair the same color?

The Doctor shrugged, but he seemed to acquiesce.

–I've wanted to ask you for a long time, actually. Why do you dye your hair like that, anyway?

"One of the Three Magi—the professor whose brainchild *Mardock Scramble* was—seemed to favor that sort of hairstyle," Oeufcoque butted in to explain.

"A complex layer of different hues. A hairstyle based authentically on chaos theory," the Doctor explained, brushing his hair back.

–You must have really respected him.

"He was the one and only master I ever recognized, and he was also responsible for designing Oeufcoque. I would have liked you to meet him."

Balot gave a small nod. She didn't press them for the details of how this person that they held in such high regard was killed by OctoberCorp. It would be an impudent intrusion into a sacred place in their hearts. But something *did* suddenly occur to her, and she asked it.

–Did your professor like to gamble?

"He was *invincible*!" the Doctor replied without hesitation.

That's what I thought. Balot nodded.

≡

After Balot returned to her room she took another, thorough, shower, then dressed up.

This time the choker was still a *Made by Oeufcoque*, but it was just an ordinary electronic voice box. Lastly, Balot took Oeufcoque in her hands and brought an image to mind. *A soft pair of gloves to cover both my hands*. Oeufcoque's body distorted with a squish, and in a flash he was wrapped around her fingers. The gloves extended up her arms and met behind her shoulders.

A gap opened where the two gloves met, and Balot slowly pulled her hands apart. The gloves separated neatly, and at the same time an Oeufcoque-style design rose to the fore. He must have been paying attention to the eCatalogue, as Balot only needed to make two or three minor alterations to the design before she was satisfied with her look.

She waited in the lobby for the Doctor, and when he emerged he was the very embodiment of someone who has lived in the amusement world for far too long and forgotten what normalcy was.

He wore a long cowboy-style coat topped by a mafioso scarf. His hair was dyed a glossy silver, and it was slicked back. His heels clicked as he swaggered toward reception to deposit his key, and he really did look as if he were ready to head on out for a proper night on the town.

The two of them stepped out of the motel to wait out front. Before long the limousine arrived to pick them up, right on time.

It was hardly her first time in a limousine, but Balot suddenly felt tense nonetheless.

"Right, let's go. Balot?" The Doctor tapped her shoulder lightly. *It's time to put on your act*,

he was saying.

–Okay.

Balot nodded as she touched the electronic voice box on her choker. The limousine driver had a pleasant smile underneath his short-brimmed hat as he opened the back door for her. Balot climbed in and called out to the Doctor.

–Aren't you getting in, Uncle?

If Balot found it funny to refer to him in this way, she did a good job of keeping it secret.

The Doctor got in the car and the driver closed the door behind him. Then the driver sat down in his seat, and the car drove off.

The Doctor's voice echoed around the car for the duration of the ride to the casino. As if to say *I'm going to show you both just what sort of player I am*. Balot added little to the conversation and mostly nodded. She played the part of the niece who had come to the big city to experience the bright lights and was being well looked after by her uncle. She exuded the easy confidence that came with having relatives living in the high-class Senorita District, at the foot of the rolling hills.

Before long the limousine stopped outside the casino entrance. Right next door was a large hotel. Beyond that were other large and impressive buildings: conference facilities, the headquarters of a number of prominent organizations. There were also TV and radio stations. The pleasure quarter spread all around.

The Doctor handed the driver a hundred-dollar bill and told him that he'd call the office to order their return limousine when they were ready.

The truth was different. The Doctor pointed toward the casino parking lot, a mischievous grin on his face. A familiar red convertible was waiting there. "I asked one of the Broilerhouse staff to have it ready for us there last night."

Balot was genuinely impressed. The Doctor always planned these things down to the last detail.

"Now, let's go and have some fun." The Doctor accompanied Balot to the entrance.

The tension that Balot had felt while she was waiting for the limousine to arrive seemed to disappear.

Above the grand entranceway that faced the strip was a sign in the shape of a giant egg, inscribed with the casino's name: EGGNOG BLUE.

The egg was split down the middle, with a 3-D digital display of chips pouring forth.

As they passed under the entrance, they felt an unusual sensation. They realized immediately what it was.

They'd had their possessions scanned in an instant. Infrared, surveillance cameras, X-ray imaging—had they been carrying anything *undesirable*, it would have been spotted immediately and they would have been intercepted.

The casino didn't let anything slip through. Not that this seemed to bother the Doctor, who walked straight in with easy assurance.

It was a large casino. There was a long corridor that led to the hotel next door and a winding pathway that led to a children's amusement park. There was also an indoor shopping court, its walls lined with giant television screens that showed the entertainment—boxing matches and magic shows.

Balot had been inside this casino a number of times before, but always on Shell's arm, and with the Doctor by her side pointing out this and that, it was almost as if she were visiting it for

the first time.

From the gaudy entrance to its décor, the casino was clearly designed to be welcoming to the masses, a family-friendly joint rather than one that catered to a minority of shadowy, elite big spenders. The theory, with legal casinos at least, was that those that catered toward ten thousand customers each spending a hundred dollars were more likely to thrive than those who went after the one high roller who spent a million. Eggnog Blue was a case in point: the joint was buzzing.

The Doctor walked briskly through the hall that was kitted out for the out-of-towners and their offspring, paying only the slightest attention. This was the Doctor, after all, and he knew exactly where he was going without having to refer to a map.

The clamor grew. Any illusions that the casino would be experiencing some sort of early-afternoon lull were dispelled by the roar of activity.

There was a dazzling array of slot machines as far as the eye could see.

The room they were now in was filled neatly with rows upon rows of machines that covered the whole gamut: from five-cent cheapies to machines for the high rollers that only accepted hundred-dollar coins.

–***Amazing…*** Balot said—there was such an uproar that she almost forgot why she was here.

"You fancy a go, do you?" the Doctor asked.

Balot nodded, true feelings to the fore.

Balot followed the Doctor through the gaps between the slot machines, as varied in size, shape, and color as the ammonites that she was so fond of. Electronic noises buzzed all around, and here and there wailed the sound of a siren—a bit like a fire engine—accompanied by the shouts of joy of men and women of all ages as they hit pay dirt. Whenever there was a major payout, a light on top of the winning machine would flare up like a police siren light, and a throng of people would congregate around the winner to offer conspicuous congratulations. Balot thought that the wave of excitement caused by the electronic sounds and the jangling of coins as they poured out of the machines were enough to give anyone a headache.

The Doctor collected a number of different types of chips at the reception counter and passed some of them to Balot.

Then he took his twenty-dollar bills and bundled them up.

"The first thing to do is soak up the atmosphere. Get used to things, ride the wave. A bit like surfing." So saying, the Doctor tripped off to check out the slot machines with a haste that would have been ill-advised had there been any real waves around.

At the back of the hall were a number of real AirCars and other luxury vehicles, with a sign above reading: HIT THE JACKPOT AND DRIVE AWAY IN ONE OF THESE BEAUTIES!

The Doctor sat down at a slot machine near the cars. Even as he explained its workings to Balot, he was pouring coins down its hatch. The cylinders started revolving, and the moment of truth approached. One of the symbols clicked into place, then another, and the Doctor's fortune was decided. Of the four lines he had bet on, one just about resulted in a payout, and five twenty-cent coins clattered into the tray below. "Not a bad way to test your luck, eh?"

Carefully, he slid some more coins into the slot and pressed the button.

For a moment, Balot thought she might try *snarcing* the machine to produce the result she wanted.

But her Oeufcoque-gloves pulled Balot's left hand away. Then the palm of her hand was by her ear, and she heard Oeufcoque's voice. "Don't underestimate the security here."

Her heart thumped.

The machine was swallowing up all of the Doctor's coins. But the Doctor seemed unconcerned and continued throwing in more coins with abandon, as if he were testing out its rhythm.

Balot stopped and sensed the inner workings of the machine. It was set up so that the slightest bit of external interference would cause it to lock down completely. Not the most subtle system in the world, but all the more secure for it.

Suddenly, Balot felt that she was being watched. She looked up at the tall ceiling. All sorts of colored illuminations were scattered around, and in between them Balot noticed an incredible number of security cameras, all firmly set in place. She gulped involuntarily.

–The Eye in the Sky, Oeufcoque said, sensing Balot's thoughts. *Originally developed for military use. Every single one of those cameras is powerful enough to accurately distinguish between different sets of footsteps in a field from a distance of twenty thousand meters. There's a whole team of surveillance staff watching behind the scenes, probably, watching every move down here. The second you try anything with the slot machine, the warning goes up and cameras will be trained on you from all angles.*

Balot squeezed her hand, indicating to Oeufcoque that she understood him loud and clear.

"Would you like a go yourself, Balot?" the Doctor asked suddenly. It seemed that his coin count was fluctuating up and down, winning some then losing them again.

Balot nodded, then asked a question through the crystal on her choker.

–Am I allowed to choose my own machine?

"Why not? Let's split up for the next half hour or so, see how we do on our own. We'll establish our supply train here, ready to move on later. May fortune smile upon you!"

Balot left the Doctor and started wandering around the machines.

She stared at them one by one, trying to feel the wave that the Doctor had been talking about.

She may not have been able to *snarc* the machines to manipulate them directly, but she could at least sound them out for variations and anomalies.

Each machine moved to its own complicated rhythm. It wasn't as if they were all standardized to some sort of median average. Before long she started to get a feel for the overall patterns.

She remembered something she had once read. A wave may be made up of individual droplets of water, but the wave doesn't actually move the surface of the water; all it does is cause the surface of the water to bob up and down as it passes.

Balot was now starting to experience this for herself.

Balot sat down in front of a machine. It was a one-dollar slot machine in the shape of a whiskey bottle. She'd selected this one because she felt that its rhythm was *settling down*.

Balot had been sensing all these loud—*exaggerated*—sounds from her surroundings. She felt that these were due to the complicated rhythms of the machines ebbing and flowing, never quite calm enough to properly read, but this machine was different. Calmer, she sensed.

Balot placed some coins in the slot, pressed the button, and watched the symbols spin around.

She sensed their movements as she stopped the wheels. Each one landed on a different symbol, almost impressively so.

Balot put another coin in the slot. Just the one, this time. She spun the wheel.

No luck. She put another coin in and again had no luck. She repeated the process a number of times, and suddenly she had won.

Balot *grasped* her feelings at that moment. She thought that Oeufcoque might have tried to say

something, but she couldn't hear him. She couldn't even hear the tumultuous roar of the machines around her anymore.

Balot continued with the machine, losing the next round. She felt just like the machines all around her—ebbing and flowing. Then she felt a sensation—her whole body being lifted. Her hand moved up to the slot naturally, automatically. She threw coins down the slot in quick succession, leaving just the slightest of gaps, until the wave was at its crest before pressing the button with perfect timing.

"Flawless…"

She heard Oeufcoque's voice. Balot came to her senses. The roar of the machines returned.

She squirmed when she heard the piercing sound of the siren. She wondered if she had done something wrong. Voices pressed in on her from all around. She realized that she was now surrounded by a huddle of people.

Amazed, Balot looked around at the throng. Everyone was voicing their astonishment.

For a moment Balot thought that she was about to be hauled away by the police, but she was wrong.

The very next moment, an incredible clanging of metal assaulted her, and she looked down at her hands.

She'd never seen so many coins before in her life. At first she wondered how she was possibly going to fit such a large quantity in her pockets, but as the coins kept coming, it wasn't long before she abandoned that idea as impossible. That was how many coins there were.

Envious voices were heard all about. A casino attendant pushed his way through the crowds.

Balot's face was still startled when she looked at him, and he smiled at her, flourishing a basket. "Shall I store your coins for you, madamoiselle?"

Balot nodded, wondering if he was about to cart all her coins away.

But she had a strong feeling that the coins weren't really hers to begin with.

As he was scooping her coins into the basket, Balot's left hand flew up to her ear again.

"Give him a tip. One dollar ought to be enough." Hearing Oeufcoque's words, Balot scrabbled around for a one-dollar bill and took it from her pocket.

The attendant turned to her with the basket full of coins in his hands. He saw the proffered note and received it graciously. Then he took Balot over to the counter, where he exchanged the full basket—so heavy that it was like carrying around a set of bowling balls—with a considerably lighter roll of hundred-dollar coins.

Balot took the hundred-dollar coins along with the basket. She counted them to discover that there were precisely sixty of them. For a moment she couldn't even work out how much money that was.

Basket in hand, Balot walked back toward the slot machines. Feeling the wave, as she did before. Then she sat down at another machine where she sensed that the wave was settling down. This time it was a five-dollar coin machine. She had only three of these in her pocket. She sat there waiting carefully before placing the first one of these in the machine.

She slotted it in gently. The wheel spun and settled, and she was nowhere near winning. She stuck the next coin in.

She let it go at precisely the moment she felt the wave rising. She lost again. But as a result, she sensed clearly that the wave still had farther to go. Balot breathed in, then out.

She waited for the wave to rise, coin held firmly in her hand.

Then her hand moved. Before she knew it, the coin had been released, the button pressed.

–What…?

Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque, surprised.

"It's not a good idea to win too much at this stage. You'll be marked out." Such was Oeufcoque's answer. He had caused her to let go of the coin early.

The wheels in the machine spun around and stopped.

There was no siren. Instead, about twenty five-dollar pieces clattered out of the bottom of the machine. Balot was confident that if she'd been allowed to get the timing absolutely right, she would have won at least ten times that.

"Remember that out of all the chips in the casino, we just need the four that we've come for. We could win hundreds of other chips along the way, or not, it really doesn't matter in the end—either we get the four we're after, or we fail. For now, best play it safe and make sure we don't draw the casino's attention unnecessarily."

–I thought you said you'd let me have some fun…

Balot seemed a little disappointed.

"It might seem like fun to you, but somehow I don't think the people around you will see it the same way. Casinos like winners—but not people who win *too* much."

Oeufcoque's words reminded her again of the cameras overhead.

Balot meekly collected her winnings in her basket and went to rendezvous with the Doctor.

"So, you think you've started to get the hang of it?" said the Doctor.

The Doctor had nothing in his hands, so at first glance it looked like he had lost all his chips, but, "Looks like we're just around the ten thousand mark combined," he went on to say, surprising Balot by pulling out a handful of thousand-dollar chips from his pockets.

–Aren't we going to use these machines to try and get Shell's chips?

"Even if we were to bleed all the slot machines dry, we'd still be shy of two million. There's no way we could reach our target. In any case, we don't want to seem like we're taking the casino head-on."

–So what are we going to do?

"Make some money off the other punters."

Balot's ears pricked up. They'd been over the plan a number of times, but only the main points and in broad strokes: what to do, when, and how to do it. The overall master plan was firmly the Doctor's territory.

"Well, looks like our supply train has come in. All that's left for us to do now is mosey on down to the front lines." The Doctor finished speaking and walked over to the other side of the slot machines.

Once they had escaped the maze of the slot machines they arrived in a large, expansive room, big enough to fit a number of tennis courts side by side.

A number of gaming tables were lined up in the middle of the room in an orderly fashion, and on either side were green plants decorating a cocktail bar. The bustle and clamor of the previous room had completely disappeared.

This space was far more chic, and the atmosphere could have been described as sophisticated.

A number of immaculately turned out dealers stood behind their tables, like actors holding the stage. Waitresses carrying trays of complementary drinks circulated briskly. Some of them wore traditional bunny outfits, and others sported outfits bearing card-inspired designs or the brand names of certain alcoholic drinks.

"You know what a mechanic is, don't you?" the Doctor asked under his breath, and Balot nodded in response.

The Doctor had told her all about mechanics—card sharps. Everything from their modi operandi to their motivations—why they risked everything to cheat at cards. Some did it for the sheer thrill, others saw it as a shortcut to fame and riches. In other cases—particularly for those who grew up as dealers in the territories where casinos were illegal—cheating was just par for the course, an act as natural and obvious as eating and drinking.

"Let's see if we can hook ourselves a couple," said the Doctor. "If we targeted the casino right at the outset then we'd be out on our heels before we knew it. So our next maneuver should be one that benefits us the most while *benefiting the casino at the same time*, and certainly not causing them any loss. That's how we'll dig our trench, so as to provide us with a solid foundation from which we can launch an all-out offensive later…"

–But would we be thrown out even if we didn't actually cheat?

"Well, look at it this way. If we tried to turn ten dollars into a million in the space of an hour,

we'd be asked to leave long before we got there. Even if our ambitions were more modest—a thousand into a hundred thousand, say—we'd get away with it to a point, but you can be sure the casino would sniff us out before too long and stop us from going much further. What we need to do is turn a hundred into a thousand, then a thousand into ten thousand, gradually, without attracting any untoward attention. The real battle starts only once we've built up a proper war chest."

Balot understood exactly what the Doctor was saying. But she had a question.

–How do we know which ones are the mechanics?

"I found us our marks while you were playing on the slot machines back there."

–How do you know, though?

"It's like I told you. *Our next maneuver should be one that benefits us the most while benefiting the casino at the same time.*" The Doctor looked up at the ceiling with a triumphant air, flashing her the thumbs-up. Amid the hustle and bustle of the casino, Balot gleaned his meaning all too well. "Mechanics are seen by the casino as the ultimate pest. Anyone who looks in the least bit suspicious is noted, and the best dealers are immediately put on the case to sniff them out and catch them in the act. Alternatively, the dealers themselves might be in on the act, and the casinos are well aware of this possibility, so they have measures in place to detect this too. The dealers have to share reports of any suspicious activities every half hour, and there are pit bosses and floor managers taking records in the background, floating behind any and every dealer that has the potential to come in direct contact with the customers. Mama sees everything, is the idea."

Balot realized why the Doctor had been grinning in the general direction of his PDA. He'd been eavesdropping on the conversations of the most suspicious people and what games they were playing.

"Now then, my pretty little niece, let Uncle show you just what a dab hand he is at the gaming table." The Doctor was suddenly speaking in a loud voice, humming away, conspicuously checking out the different games in progress. He looked every bit the cocky country squire, here in the big city determined to prove to the world that he was no bumpkin, and probably ready to lose the shirt off his back to feed his gambling habit. Truth be told, he played the act so convincingly that Balot was a little embarrassed to be seen with him.

All the while Balot was playing the part of a girl who had no interest in the actual games but rather was overwhelmed by the glamour and the sophistication of her surroundings. This was her assigned role—and again she felt more or less this way in reality too.

"Right, let's try this spot here. Looks like there might be some nice pokers rolling around," the Doctor boomed, arriving at a table that was in between games.

–Pokers?

The Doctor indicated to Balot to sit down, and she did.

The Doctor had an extremely self-satisfied look on his face. "Yeah, pokers for prodding each other with. That's the sort of game poker is." So saying, he laid his chips on the table.

The dealer looked at Balot. "Is the young lady with you, sir?" he asked. He was a young man, whose blond hair went well with his clear blue eyes.

"Indeed. Though once she's at the table beside me, she's as good as a rival," the Doctor said, and then nodded without delay. "You have a go too, young lady. You've played in your game room at home, right? If you don't spend your pocket money here you'll only squander it on clothes anyway—why not use it for something a bit more thrilling for a change?"

–How many chips will I need, Uncle?

As she spoke, Balot grabbed a handful of hundred-dollar coins from her basket. The dealer and the other punters at the table were momentarily taken aback. Those must be quite some clothes for her to squander that much money on them…

In reality, all the clothes she had ever bought in her life up to this point—with the money that she had struggled so hard to earn—could have easily been bought twice over with less than the amount she was now holding in one hand.

–Is this enough? Balot asked. The dealer seemed troubled for half a second as he watched Balot speak through the device on her neck, without moving her lips, but then he nodded.

The dealer exchanged the coins for chips and gratefully accepted the tip that the Doctor thrust out.

Then the dealer made a broad gesture for the floor manager—to show that he had received this tip legitimately—and placed it in the middle of the table on the designated spot for tips, for all to see. Balot had thought he might put the chip away in his pocket, but then she realized that all his pockets were neatly sewn up. This joint ran a tight ship. Indeed, it seemed a point of pride for the dealer to conspicuously show off how upright and cleanhanded he was. Back straight, he looked at the customers around the table.

There were four other punters at the table besides Balot and the Doctor. One wore a cowboy hat and was chomping on a cigar, and to his right was a quiet-looking man dressed in an unobtrusive business suit.

These two sat to the right of Balot and the Doctor. To Balot's left was an elderly gentleman with neat, close-cropped hair, and to his left a middle-aged man with a potbelly.

According to the Doctor, one of these four was a mechanic.

"Oh, by the way, do you mind if we use sign language?" the Doctor asked the dealer. The dealer looked a little worried and shook his head. *Negative.*

"But she's disabled; her larynx doesn't work. Surely you can see that just by looking at her? I'm not asking you to overlook it if she mispronounces something, I'm just asking if it's okay for me to interpret and speak on her behalf if anything goes wrong with her machine."

The dealer touched the earphone close to his ear to clear the request with his manager.

"That should be fine, sir," he said. *By all rights we should say no, but we'll make an exception just this once as you're here to enjoy yourselves*, his face seemed to say. If ever the Doctor's demeanor were going to be useful, it would be here. From the dealer's point of view, the two punters in front of him were sitting ducks, ready to be plucked, and he was prepared to bend the rules to accommodate them however inappropriate the request.

The same went for the other players around the table. "What about you gentlemen—any objections?" asked the Doctor.

The cowboy hat shrugged his shoulders, while the suit next to him answered courteously that he had none.

Neither did the potbelly or the old gentleman have too many worries, it seemed. Indeed, they were only too happy to have a young lady join them at the table, they said. The cowboy hat suddenly chimed in to suggest that someone should make special chips for the disabled. Everyone else pretended not to hear him. Balot immediately hoped that he was the mechanic.

Without warning her left hand rose to touch her earring. "Pay him no attention," she heard Oeufcoque say, as her fingers twiddled with her earring.

Within her heart, Balot nodded. That was all it took to communicate her feelings to Oeufcoque.

“From now on, we do everything by the book, okay? Listen to your left hand. Don’t deviate from the script,” said Oeufcoque.

Balot’s face tightened.

–Don’t worry. I won’t make any mistakes.

And then the betting commenced.

≡

The game was Hold’em.

Each player was dealt two cards facedown, and the idea was to try and combine these with the five community cards—that were dealt face up on the table—in order to make the best hand, with four rounds of betting to each hand.

The minimum bet at this table was thirty dollars at a time, the maximum sixty dollars.

It was a spread-limit game with up to three raises, meaning that the stakes could quickly rise to a large sum of money.

The dealer signaled that the game had begun, stopping any new entrant from attempting to join in.

With slick hand movements the dealer placed the cards into a machine and pressed a number of buttons.

After confirming to all at the table that the deck of cards had been officially cut, he gathered up the cards and slipped them into the card shoe and began the first hand.

First to be dealt a card was the suit, then counterclockwise to the cowboy, the Doctor, Balot, the old gentleman, and the potbelly, then repeating, so that they all ended up with two cards each.

The dealer’s button was in front of the suit, indicating that he would have been in the dealing position if there hadn’t already been a house dealer.

The cowboy to the left of him was the blind better for this hand. The blind was like the ante in normal poker and was more like a participation fee than an actual bet at this stage, as no one had anything to go on other than their hole, the first two cards.

The first blind bet was called the small blind, where the player could bet anything up to half the minimum bet. The cowboy threw in ten dollars.

Then it was the Doctor’s turn to respond with the big blind.

The purpose of the big blind was not just to call the small blind, but also to force a raise.

The Doctor raised the cowboy by twenty dollars.

From then on, the other players had to start off by throwing in the sum of the two bets—thirty dollars—in order to call and thereby stay in the hand. Or they could raise the stakes further, in thirty-dollar increments, or fold and drop out of the hand completely, losing any stake they had placed up to that point.

Balot’s two cards that she had been dealt—in the hole—were the ten of clubs, 10♣, and the seven of spades, 7♠. At this point in the game, twelve cards had been dealt to the players out of a total of fifty-two in the deck. She was third along from the dealer’s button.

It was a nothing hand, the sort of hand you should fold on immediately. Even Balot knew this. Hold’em was one of the games that Balot had beaten into her last night in the Humpty.

But Oeufcoque signaled differently.

–You should call.

Balot felt the instructions float up on her left hand. She picked up a thirty-dollar chip.

–Thirty dollars—I'd like to call.

She placed the chip on the table.

The old gentleman called too, and the potbelly quickly folded.

Last to go was the suit who held the dealer's button. He called, then raised by another thirty.

The cowboy and the Doctor called.

Balot followed Oeufcoque's instructions and called.

The old gentleman called.

There were no more raises. There was now $280 in the pot on the table.

The first round of betting was over, and the dealer discarded the first card in the card shoe. The burn card, an anti-cheating measure. A standard step taken to eliminate the possibility of any player gaining an unfair advantage by marking the cards.

Then the dealer placed three cards facedown in the center of the table. Community cards, called the flop. It was now time for the second round of betting.

The dealer turned each of the flop cards over.

K♣, 8♠, and 2♥.

At this point, Balot had no pairs and no chance of a flush.

A straight was still possible, using the ten, eight, and seven, but Balot didn't know what the odds were of that happening.

The second round of betting started with the blinds: the cowboy put in thirty dollars, which the Doctor called, as did Balot on Oeufcoque's instructions.

At this point the old gentleman folded, placing his cards facedown on the table.

The suit, on the other hand, called, and then raised by another thirty. No one folded, and by the time they were back at the suit, the pot had swollen from its original $280 to $520. Balot suddenly thought of what she would have had to do in her previous line of work in order to make that much money. The thought made her sick.

She knew that she would struggle to walk away from the hand now. She didn't want to know what Oeufcoque had planned.

It seemed that Oeufcoque was ruminating deeply. As to the identity of the mechanic. She realized that he might not even be bothered by the actual outcome of this hand.

The third round commenced.

The dealer discarded the burn card again, then revealed the fourth community card.

The turn card, it was called, the penultimate community card. It was J♣. Balot jumped unconsciously.

She now had the jack, ten, eight, and seven; if the next card was a nine she'd have a straight.

She sensed that Oeufcoque was working out the next card using something beyond human perception.

If not, and he was just forcing her to call regardless, he was a rank amateur.

Or was he just trying to get her to act as if *she* was?

The cowboy started off with a thirty-dollar bet, which the Doctor called.

–Raise by sixty dollars.

The words floated up on her hand—she could feel them clearly, but still she had to check a

number of times to convince herself that this was right.

–I'll call the thirty dollars and raise an additional sixty, please.

She placed the chips down. Balot now had a total of $210 riding on this hand.

She saw visions of all her winnings from the slot machines disappearing in an instant, and she felt a pang of fear.

The suit called her sixty and raised another sixty. The cowboy called, and the Doctor did the same. It was Balot's turn again.

–Raise by sixty.

This was the instruction she was given. It was do or die. She had no idea why she had to go in so strong in the very first hand. Balot called the sixty raised by the suit. Then she raised herself, bringing her total contribution to the pot to $330.

The suit showed not a moment's hesitation. Indeed, he went on to re-raise himself.

The cowboy called—and, incredibly, raised again.

At this point the Doctor checked. A special move permitted from the third round of betting onward in which the player chooses to stay in the game without betting any more money at this stage. Balot became acutely aware that it was up to her now, and when the instruction came from Oeufcoque to *call* she actually felt relieved. She'd been worried he was going to make her raise again. She paid the $120 to match the suit and the cowboy, making her total outlay to this point $450.

The suit called, and just when it seemed that betting for this round was over,

"Raise." It was the suit again. Returning fire, thorough and ruthless.

–Call.

So came Oeufcoque's orders. The cowboy called, as did Balot. $510, now.

The Doctor, however, folded, laying his cards on the table. *Ho hum*, he grumbled. But Balot was the one who sighed.

After the suit called again, the cowboy called too. Moreover, "Raise, sixty dollars," he added.

Oeufcoque was telling her to call again. She obeyed. She was now up to $570.

The suit called, and finally the round was over. There was nearly two thousand dollars in the pot.

This stupid sum of money was about to flutter away like a paper plane.

The old gentleman and the potbelly, though both out of the hand, were watching the progress with deep interest.

The dealer discarded the burn card for the third time this hand, then revealed the river card, the fifth and final community card.

They were in the final round of betting.

Balot looked at it without thinking, and it was all she could do not to reveal her disappointment.

The card was 7♥. She'd come this far, and in the end all she was left with was a pair of sevens. Or were the suit and cowboy both bluffing too, and did she have enough to beat them even with her weak hand?

Oeufcoque should be able to sniff out their bluffing in an instant, surely…

Right now, though, the cowboy was leisurely increasing his bet.

–Call.

Following Oeufcoque's instructions, Balot threw another sixty in, trying to appear as

disinterested as possible.

"I'll see your sixty dollars and raise another sixty," said the suit, and the cowboy called and re-raised.

–Call…

Balot stuck in another $120 to call, but then she realized Oeufcoque's instruction was not yet complete, and he was finishing it now:

–Call…then raise sixty dollars.

Balot's stomach was churning, but she knew that she had to go along unquestioningly or else she would arouse the suspicion of those around her. Furrowing her brow without even realizing it, Balot raised again. An outlay of $180.

The suit glanced at Balot. "Call, and raise sixty dollars," he said calmly, laying his chips on the table.

Teeth bared, the cowboy called and then raised again.

Oeufcoque's next instruction was abrupt.

–Fold.

Balot's hand—already holding the chips required to call—stopped suddenly. This was nonsense. Completely at odds with what she'd been doing up till now. *I could at least check for now*, she thought, knowing that it wouldn't have cost her any more to stay in the game for the time being. But, with the greatest of reluctance, she laid her cards down on the table.

–Fold.

A broad smirk broke out across the cowboy's face. A most disagreeable smile, as if he were coercing someone to do something against their will. Then he turned to square off against the suit.

The suit, on the other hand, called with a breezy tone and raised again. The cowboy growled, called for the last time, and then the betting was over and it was time for the showdown.

The suit was the last to raise, and he revealed his hand first.

K♠ and 2♦. Two pairs, kings over deuces. There was no bluffing involved with this hand. Had either the turn or the river card revealed a king or a deuce, he would have had a nearly unbeatable full house.

"Whoa," the cowboy exclaimed. He threw his cards down, revealing his hand.

K♥ and 8♠. The same hand—two pairs—but his was higher. The cowboy reached out and dragged the pot toward himself. Like a dog at dinnertime.

The dealer was just starting to collect all the cards when the Doctor tapped Balot on her shoulder.

"So, what sort of hand did you have, then?" he asked her, loudly.

An unthinkable question under normal circumstances. And it was the Doctor himself who had impressed upon her in training that there was nothing that gave your opponents the upper hand more than revealing your cards unnecessarily—they'd learn to read you like a book. Yet here the Doctor was, brushing Balot's hand away as she tried to protect the cards from his reach. He flipped them both over for all to see.

"Ah, I see what you were doing. Going for the straight, eh? A little too ambitious with a hand like this, though. You really should have folded at the start, you know."

He didn't really need to tell her this, of course, and she shrank up into a ball.

On the other side of the table the cowboy burst out laughing. His mood couldn't have been better.

Nor did the other players make a secret of the fact that they were digesting Balot's hand and its implications. The full extent of her inexperience and lack of skill was now clear for all to see.

"You know, it's a real shame—if only I'd been as bold as you…" the Doctor continued, flipping over his own hand just before the dealer got to it.

2♣ and 2♠. Three of a kind! The cowboy's eyes widened, and the other players looked on, the scene clearly making a great impression on them.

Rock—the name given to the type of player who bets prudently, even on a strong hand. In this instance, the description fit the Doctor perfectly. But wasn't it the Doctor himself who had taught her that excessive caution could be just as much a cause of defeat as recklessness? The other players surely now saw him as a godsend of an opponent, just like Balot, but for entirely different reasons. Balot was about to forget herself and say something to him, but then the Doctor winked. Quickly and discreetly, so that no one else would have noticed. Balot understood that his actions weren't entirely without cause.

Balot made a sulky face as they proceeded on to the next game.

Part of her was acting, of course, on cue. But there was another part of her that really *was* sulking. Oeufcoque and the Doctor were still aiming to win—they just hadn't shared any information with her as to how they planned to go about doing so.

≡

The card shoe containing a new deck was brought forward, and the second hand had begun.

Balot's hand was Q♣ and 8♣.

The dealer's button had moved round, and the Doctor was now the blind better.

The first bet was ten dollars. Balot quickly raised, as she had to, and the calls went round the table.

The cowboy seemed to have acquired a taste for winning—he was the only one to raise, anyway—and the potbelly folded from the outset, just as in the previous hand. The calls finished, and the three flop cards were turned over.

5♣, 8♦, Q♥. There was another round of calling and raising, and the suit, seemingly tired out by being pushed to the wire on the previous hand, folded.

They moved into the third round of betting, and the turn card was revealed.

It was K♣. Balot's heart skipped a beat. She realized that she had the chance of making a club flush, even if she might be hoping against hope at this late stage in the game.

Even if she didn't make it, she would still be left with two pairs, queens over eights. She thought about the eight hundred she had just lost and realized that this was her chance to turn things around.

–Fold.

Such was the instruction she eventually received, but only after the old gentleman raised after her call and the cowboy's raise… Disappointed, Balot placed her cards down. The writing in the palm of her hand subsided, and the active players finished their calls, moving the hand on to the final round.

The fifth card, the river, was A♣. Balot was thrown into deep confusion.

The flush was now complete. Including the money she'd lost on this hand, she was now down by well over a thousand dollars. The only explanation she could think of was that she was somehow supposed to be playing in a nonsensical manner.

And, sure enough, that was the case.

The Doctor ended up folding in the final round, leaving the cowboy and the old gentleman to fight it out.

The old gentleman raised, and the cowboy saw and raised him. This process repeated a number of times.

The cowboy was now well into the game, totally absorbed, passionate.

The old man, on the other hand, remained composed, lining up his chips in an orderly fashion.

The betting came to a close. Showdown, and the old gentleman led by revealing K♠ and K♥. Three of a kind. A strong enough hand in Hold'em.

Snap—the cowboy suddenly flung his cards to the table with a flourish.

At first Balot thought that he must have thrown his cards down out of frustration that he had just lost, but she was wrong.

Teeth bared, the cowboy laughed coarsely and declared his hand.

A♥ and A♦—that was what was in the hole for him. Three of a kind, aces. The cowboy had won. This pushed the cowboy's winnings to just shy of four thousand dollars.

Balot could no longer see the cowboy as anything other than the mechanic.

How are the Doctor and Oeufcoque planning on beating him? she wondered.

The next hand commenced. *We'll get him this time,* she hoped.

Balot was dealt 6♣ and 3♣. The dealer's button was in front of the Doctor now.

Balot made her blind bet without a moment's delay. Yet again the potbelly folded in the first round. The cowboy raised, and everyone else called, and the first round was over.

The flop was dealt to the center of the table and turned over one by one.

10♠, 5♣, and 4♥.

It was hard for Balot to contain her excitement. She now had six-five-four-three, and all she needed was a two or a seven to make her straight—or she could use the 5♣ to aim for a flush.

–Fold.

The instruction came just as she was about to bet. Unbelievable. Oeufcoque's order directly contradicted every natural impulse Balot felt. She closed her eyes and placed her cards down on the table.

–Why?

She spoke directly to Oeufcoque now. Folding at this point meant that all she could do for the rest of the hand was watch the other players as the hand progressed.

–I've worked it all out.

This was Oeufcoque's answer.

–You've worked out who the mechanic is?

–I've worked out everything.

Balot frowned.

–You mean that the man who's winning is the mechanic? she asked, as if to say *I've worked that much out for myself*.

But Oeufcoque's answer couldn't have been more different.

–The man to the far right and the man on the end at the left are partners in crime.

Balot was amazed. He was talking about the suit and the potbelly.

As they talked, *snarcing* to each other, play had progressed to the third round.

The turn card was J♣. Balot and the potbelly were out, so it was between the other four now.

–Looks like clubs are a lucky suit for you.

Not that Balot was remotely interested. It was Oeufcoque who'd squashed her two chances for a flush, after all.

–More importantly, won't you tell me how you know? Why do you say those two are the mechanics?

–I can tell by their odor and their actions.

–Even though they're losing?

–There's not much mileage in winning from the outset. The best way to make money is to let someone start winning, hook him, then take it all back and more. That's what these three seem to think anyway.

–Three?

–The dealer is in on the action too.

Before she could stop herself, Balot had glanced at the dealer. He was just in the process of dealing the river card for the last round. It was A♦. She didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved; the card meant that she would have had neither a straight nor a flush.

–So the cowboy isn't a mechanic?

–No. He's a rabbit in the headlights, just waiting to be mowed down. You just watch—he's about to start losing heavily.

Oeufcoque's blunt words seemed to put Balot in a slightly better mood, and she asked him another question.

–How can you tell when people are cheating?

–I'll show you, but you have to act nonchalant. The suit is going to win this hand.

Balot looked at the suit. He had a poker face on—the term could have been coined for him.

The old gentleman raised, and the suit called and re-raised. The cowboy went red in the face and called, and the Doctor looked toward Balot as he called too.

"So, do you think you're starting to get the hang of it? The important thing is to get used to the ambience." The Doctor spoke to her as if he were some sort of great authority, and everyone else around the table listened.

Balot, though, was the only one who understood the subtext—what he really meant by this.

–Yes, I think I'm starting to get it. What about you, Uncle? I hope you win this hand!

She was growing into her role.

–The pile of chips are ordered in such a way to show what numbers he has.

Oeufcoque explained. He was referring to the first pile of chips that the suit had used in order to call. And, indeed, the numerals on the chips ran parallel to the white lines on the table.

–The man on the far left is holding a chip between the middle finger and ring finger of his left hand.

The potbelly was indeed doing that.

–The man in the suit is the designated winner of this hand—he has three aces. The Doctor has two pairs, fives over fours. The cowboy next to the Doctor has three jacks. And the old man next to you has two pairs, tens over fours.

–How can you possibly know all this?

It was hard to believe. Reading emotions through odor was one thing, but surely there was no way he could accurately work out what every card was?

–The man on the far left is exchanging information with the dealer and the man wearing the suit. I just picked up on that. As for the rest, I just observed for a while, and I can tell how certain people start to smell when they get dealt a certain hand.

Balot found herself growing more and more impressed as Oeufcoque's words appeared on her hand.

–The man on the left is broadcasting who has what pairs in relation to the community cards. He's using the position of the chip in his right hand to show the others the strongest hand among us marks. The shape and posture of his left hand is showing them what the other people have, and whether the dealer is able to deal the man in the suit a stronger hand or not. The man in the suit placed his chips the way he did to signal for the river card to be an ace.

–They can manipulate the cards that are dealt too?

–They have certain cards concealed in the card shoe. Marked cards. The sort you can identify by touch—a funny shaped corner, or one card slightly bigger than the others. They don't need to mark every single one; as long as they have a couple of high cards such as aces and kings, and know which suit is which, they have an overwhelming advantage.

Balot noticed that the dealer's hands did indeed brush against the cards in the card shoe now and then. The move was disguised so that it looked entirely natural, but she could see that he was definitely feeling the shape of the cards.

–The sneaks!

–Looks like the mechanics are about to win.

The old gentleman folded, and the Doctor folded too.

The cowboy raised and raised again, through gritted teeth that ground together so noisily that Balot thought they might crumble to bits. She almost felt sorry for him, the sitting duck that the mechanics were preparing to pluck and roast.

The betting was finally over, and the cowboy revealed his hand with vigor. Three jacks. Just as Oeufcoque had predicted.

The cowboy's manner seemed to suggest that it was a close call but he felt he had a good chance of victory.

But that was what good cheating was all about—making the mark feel he has a chance when in reality he has none.

The suit revealed his hand. The cowboy recoiled.

Three aces. It was just like the previous hand, except the shoe was now on the other foot.

Balot watched the chips flow over to the suit, and at last she realized what was happening. You needed bait to catch a sucker, and what better bait than *another* sucker? They let the cowboy win at first, then just as he started getting into the mood they would take it all back from him and then some, all the while keeping alive the flame of false hope that he might still have a chance.

The suit won the next hand too. After that the old gentleman won, then the cowboy, then back to the suit.

As far as Balot and the Doctor were concerned, money was only flowing one way. They gave a convincing impression of a pair who were delighted just to be there and happy to pay for the privilege of being allowed to participate.

The mechanics weren't slow to recognize this. In other words, they made sure that Balot and the Doctor had good cards, or at least good enough to dangle a glimmer of false hope before them before pulling it away at the last minute—until the next hand.

The second round of betting had just begun when Oeufcoque suddenly asked Balot a question.

–Do you think you could snarc *one of the overhead cameras?*

–Probably, yes.

–Try shifting the camera that's watching over your hand.

Balot did so. She sensed the security cameras on the ceiling without so much as a glance in their direction.

There were three cameras pointed at the table. Not that they were particularly paying attention to it at the present time—they were simply three of the many that scanned the room, and they happened to monitor Balot's table.

Balot *snarced* the three cameras ever so slightly, causing them to shift just a few millimeters. The security systems on the cameras themselves were fairly easy to crack—after all, it wasn't as though the customers were likely to climb up to the ceiling and adjust them individually. Balot did adjust them, so that there was now a small blind spot that happened to be just about where she was sitting.

Balot's cards at the time were K♣ and 8♠.

The flop was 10♣, 6♠ and J♣.

–See if you can tune into everyone's breathing patterns.

Balot obeyed, honing in on the breathing rhythms of everyone at the table, including the dealer. They breathed in, then out. In again, then out again.

There wasn't a single one of them who could survive without breathing, after all.

The cowboy's breathing was the roughest. His breaths were centered around the area from his chest to his shoulders. The old gentleman's exhalations came from below his belly. The dealer, the other mechanics, and the Doctor all breathed from the area between their chest and their belly.

Their breathing changed as the game progressed, and in particular all of them began breathing heavily when it came time to call.

–Aim to call your hand at the precise moment everyone has fully exhaled.

Balot followed Oeufcoque's orders obediently, and she fell into a new pattern of play, almost without meaning to.

–Try and relax, go with the flow.

The moment Oeufcoque said this, Balot's right hand moved suddenly, of its own accord. This was the instant that everyone at the table had just finished exhaling. Balot found that she had exchanged one of her cards with one of the Doctor's cards that he had just laid down on the table after folding in the first round.

–You see, the instant between exhaling and starting a new breath is the moment a person's guard is at its lowest.

Balot's cards were now K♣ and Q♣. Nobody had noticed.

–Looks like clubs really are your lucky suit.

Oeufcoque's words were simultaneously an observation and a prediction.

The third round of betting began. The Doctor and the potbelly had both already folded, so it was now a four-horse race. The turn card was J♠. This made a pair with the jack in the flop, so anyone who had three of a kind on another number would automatically end up with a near-

unbeatable full house. The hand now came down to a battle of wits as each attempted to guess whether the other players were nearly there, already there, or just bluffing.

The old gentleman raised, and the suit called. The cowboy called and raised again.

–Raise to the limit.

Balot entered her money to call, then raised a further $120. The calls went round the table, the cowboy raising and Balot re-raising. By the end, the pot contained over two thousand dollars.

The calls finished, and with them the third round of betting.

Balot couldn't stop her chest from throbbing.

The dealer put his hand to the card shoe.

The fact that his eyes glanced at the hand signals of the man on the far left didn't escape Balot.

The river card was flipped over.

A♣.

Incredible—and for a moment, Balot really couldn't believe it.

–That's what I thought—I figured our chances were about one in four for this one, Oeufcoque whispered to Balot as she continued to raise the stakes throughout the round.

–It's a peculiarly human characteristic to be biased toward a certain suit or number, to give off a particular smell whenever confronted with it. The man on the far right gives off relief whenever a spade is dealt, for example. The others, too, give off distinctive odors whenever they see a certain suit. It seems that clubs aren't very popular at this table.

–Is that why so many are coming to me? I'm getting everyone's leftovers?

–I suppose you could call it the inevitable surplus, yes. But, you know, this is what many people would call luck, or destiny.

Oeufcoque was as wishy-washy as ever.

The old gentleman folded. Just the suit and the cowboy left to beat.

They both raised to the end, as did Balot.

The cowboy was the first to show his hand.

6♠ and J♥. Full house. The gloating grin that covered his entire face contrasted sharply with the curt smile of the suit.

The suit then opened his hands to reveal his hand: A♠ and A♦. A full house, aces over jacks. Virtually unbeatable. To do so would require a now-impossible full house of aces over kings or queens, an incredibly rare four of a kind, or an even rarer straight flush or a royal straight flush. And four of a kind was also impossible at this point in the hand, the cowboy having played the third jack. All that was left was the infinitesimally small chance of a straight flush or a royal straight flush.

So everyone was confident that the suit would now win.

The cowboy gritted his teeth, rolled his eyes, and watched as the suit leaned over to claim his chips.

–I do believe I've won, Balot said aloud. Nobody quite seemed to understand her at first. A second later, the old gentleman sitting next to her let out a loud cry. All eyes were now on Balot, and all were silent.

K♣ and Q♣.

The suit, the potbelly, and the dealer were all horrified.

The king and queen of clubs, joined by the jack, ten, and ace.

The hand so rare that it could, for all intents and purposes, be discounted for normal playing

purposes. The odds against it were roughly 65,000 to one. A royal straight flush.

–I* have *won, haven't I?

Balot appeared uncomfortable under everyone's gaze. She looked as if she were worried that she might have gotten it wrong and was visibly relieved when the dealer nodded in affirmation.

Suddenly there was a burst of excitement all around. Passersby were stopping to gawk at Balot's hand.

Balot started raking in the mountain of chips—over three thousand dollars total—when the dealer added a number of thousand-dollar chips to the pile, along with some sort of certificate. It seemed that the house provided a special prize to anyone who made a royal straight flush. On top of the bonus cash was a free night in the suite of the casino's sister hotel, a number of tokens to exchange for prizes at reception, and instructions on how to arrange for the commemorative photograph at the table.

The dealer seemed calm and composed enough, but Oeufcoque had different ideas.

–He smells of anger and fear.

The table had originally been selected by the Doctor after he had carefully scrutinized the casino records. He chose it because its patterns diverged slightly from the house average. Not quite enough to draw the suspicion of the house—yet—but any further deviations from the norm would be likely to result in a *lot* of interest in the dealer's actions.

And it wasn't only the winners who caused the averages to go askew.

When a plan to swindle marks goes bad, it can go *really* bad—and that was when the most extreme outcomes emerged.

–They'll probably start to get serious about now. And that's when we go in for the kill. Cheaters have it tough in legal casinos, in a very different way from illegal ones.

Balot felt Oeufcoque's explanation in the palm of her hand.

–Legal casinos consider cheats to be the worst hazard there is—they're bad for business, and they interfere with the family-friendly image that the casinos try so hard to cultivate. A cheat who is caught faces immediate expulsion, a permanent ban from all casinos, and he'll never be able to work in the gaming industry ever again. He won't even be allowed to own shares in a casino or take a backroom role. He'll be out, thoroughly and with absolute finality.

This was why the dealer and the other mechanics now had to try and bring the table back toward average. Their livelihoods, if not their lives, were at stake. If you pricked them, would they not bleed? The answer was: *most definitely*.

–I'm sure the mechanics have been moving from table to table, using their same tricks every time. But if we can wrong-foot just one of them—well, catch one, catch all.

The dealer's actions and his shifty, sharp eye movements seemed to confirm Oeufcoque's every word.

The dealer dealt the next hand, and as Balot picked up her cards she noticed a number of things looking toward her that hadn't been there a minute ago. More overhead cameras, responding incredibly quickly to recent developments at the table.

The cameras were focused in on all the people at the table except for Balot.

The casino, after all, could draw on their records to note how much Balot had lost at the table up to this point. A duty manager was far more likely to conclude that a cheating maneuver from someone else had somehow backfired, rather than assume that Balot had anything to do with the cheating herself.

The mechanics and the dealer understood this fact all too well, and this only contributed to the intense pressure they were now under.

And yet they needed to continue cheating in order to try and bring the table back toward some sort of average. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Balot's cards were 2♣ and 4♠.

–That's their game, then. No more high cards for us—they'll be keeping the aces and kings to themselves from now on.

–What should we do?

–Raise them.

Balot did so. In the first round she acted assertively, raising and re-raising when she had the chance. She was just as forceful in the second round.

She felt the dealer and the two other mechanics give a collective sigh of relief. They seemed to believe that she had fallen for their plan, and now she was betting indiscriminately on a weak hand.

This would make it easier for them to bring things back toward an average pattern of play, or so they hoped. Even the potbelly was raising now, as if to acknowledge that this round was their opportunity to put everything right in one fell swoop.

No one folded, and they moved into the second round of betting.

The flop cards were 5♣, K♠, K♥.

There were a number of rounds of calls and raises, during which the old gentleman folded.

–The cameras.

Balot knew what Oeufcoque meant and followed his orders automatically. She *snarced* the cameras, moving them by a couple of millimeters so that none of them were focused directly on her, deliberately or not. Then her gloves *squished*, swallowing one of her cards and spitting out another in a split second, without anyone noticing. Her cards were now 2♣ and 3♣.

They moved into the third round.

The moment the turn card was revealed, the cowboy folded with a sigh. It was 4♣. The potbelly raised cautiously, the Doctor met this and raised him back, and Balot and the suit both called. They went around the table a number of times, each performing the same set of actions.

After the raises and re-raises were finished they moved into the fourth round.

The river card was A♣.

It was just like the last hand. Balot did wonder whether they might not be pushing her luck, but:

–I know for a fact that nobody has the real 3♣ in their hand. Relax.

So she did, silently obeying Oeufcoque's instructions, calling when necessary. They were fighting fire with fire, and with Oeufcoque on her side Balot knew she had more or less won before the game had even started.

Eventually the Doctor folded and the potbelly too, sensing that his task of raising the stakes had been accomplished. The suit raised, and Balot called without a second thought. The suit looked troubled for a moment, unnerved by her confidence. But he couldn't retreat at this point. There *was* no retreat.

The suit revealed his hand. His cards were an extremely impressive A♠ and K♦.

A full house, aces over kings. Surely an unbeatable hand.

–I think I've won.

The suit's hands were already reaching for the pile of chips when Balot interrupted.

His hands stopped deadly still, and the only sound was the cowboy roaring as he clocked Balot's cards.

The suit withdrew his hands from the pile of chips and, with the dealer, looked on in horror at Balot's hand.

–I have the ace, two, three, four, and five of clubs.

Not royal, but a full-on straight flush nonetheless.

One of the very few hands in the game that beats a full house of aces over kings.

The mechanics blanched, and even the cowboy and the old gentleman were stopped still in their tracks. The Doctor was the Doctor, and played his part of the overenthusiastic country bumpkin with relish.

Balot proceeded to rake in her winnings. Oeufcoque nimbly changed her altered card back to normal, and the cards were returned facedown. Ever the professional, the dealer returned the cards to the cutting machine and opened a new deck, but even as he did so his eyes flitted to the other two mechanics.

–And so it begins…the seeds of doubt have been planted, and they're about to reap what they've sown.

Oeufcoque explained that it was only natural for the dealer to assume now that the two other mechanics were taking advantage of him, cutting him out and somehow using Balot to defraud the casino. At the same time, from the perspective of the two mechanics who were playing, it looked like the dealer was deliberately manipulating the cards in order to sting them and drive them from the table and out of the casino so that he could keep all their ill-gotten gains for himself.

–Let's have the Doctor win a round now.

Balot knew her cue when she heard it and gave a cue of her own in turn.

–You need to show a bit more courage, Uncle—you'll never win anything unless you keep betting lots right to the end of the hand.

She had her impression of the eager niece down to a tee—how could anyone imagine in a million years that she had just given the Doctor his cue to bet heavily on his next hand?

"You're right! Well, it seems to be working for you, so let's see if I can ride your coattails." The Doctor understood her perfectly.

The game commenced, mutual suspicion swirling around the three mechanics.

Balot's cards were 8♣ and 7♠.

The flop was K♣, 8♥, and A♠, and the suit was the blind better.

There were a number of raises and calls. The cowboy, evidently shocked back into a measure of cool-headedness by the two straight flushes on the trot, folded without a second's hesitation.

The potbelly, on the other hand, was doing everything he could to catch the dealer's eye to try and communicate his intentions.

–Look, the dealer's started cheating, so he's committed—might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. You'll see he gets increasingly bolder now.

And, sure enough, Balot clearly caught the dealer as he dealt a card from the bottom of the deck in the card shoe.

The turn card was 8♦.

Amid the melee the potbelly folded, followed by the old gentleman.

They moved on into the final round, and the river card was revealed. At the very same instant Balot interfered with the overhead cameras again, *snarcing* them, and Oeufcoque pounced. In a

movement that was too fast for human eyes to pick up on, he switched one of the Doctor's cards, then:

–Time to fold.

The river card was A♥.

The suit raised, and the Doctor raised again, and at this point Balot folded. The dealer and the two mechanics seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Then the betting was over, and the hands were revealed.

The suit had A♣ and K♠. Another full house. The best full house there was, twice, back to back. Even the cowboy seemed suspicious.

But all that was put aside in the next moment. The Doctor paused for a beat, then said, "Hmm, looks like I might have won."

The suit had his hands over the chips again, but all the strength seemed to flow from his body when he heard the Doctor's words, and he almost swooned as he turned to look at the bad news.

8♣ and 8♠.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, and if you can't join 'em, beat 'em. There was no way the Doctor could have had a better full house, so he had gone one better—four of a kind.

–Their system is quite a simple one, really, and it's just based around getting high-scoring full houses. They haven't really planned ahead as far as being able to deal with hands such as a low four of a kind or straight flushes.

Oeufcoque had nailed it. From that moment on, either the potbelly or the suit always seemed to turn out a full house of one shape or another. No thought for averages or odds. Caution was thrown to the wind, prudence out the window.

The cowboy went into a sulk, throwing chip after chip at the table. And it only took another hand before the old gentleman reached his limit; the old man silently stood up and walked away from the table.

Neither the dealer nor the two other mechanics had any idea what was going on. They grew impatient and frustrated, and were exactly where Oeufcoque wanted them, dancing to his tune.

They had been doomed to failure from the beginning. However good a poker face was, there was no human being on this planet who could control their body odor at will. Oeufcoque read their emotions precisely and to the most minute of details, and Balot almost started feeling sorry for the mechanics, as their very essence seemed to be, layer by layer, exposed raw.

The cowboy's chips ran out mid-hand, and as he was now all in, a second pot was created in accordance with the tap-out rules. In the end, he lost.

The cowboy left the table, spitting in disgust, and it was all the mechanics could do to watch him as he disappeared.

Other customers milled around the area, but none of them came near the table directly—there was a general sense that all was not quite right with the table. So now it was just Balot, the Doctor, and the three cheats.

Before long, though, the dealer stopped paying any attention to the other two mechanics. And soon enough, one of the remaining mechanics slipped up with a hand signal—or was it the other one who misread it?—and the trust between them completely broke down. All three mechanics were fit to burst. Oeufcoque noted everything, sliced away at their innermost feelings, and ruthlessly took their chips.

It wasn't long before the potbelly was out of chips. He rose up and left the gaming table

without a word.

The suit watched him go before getting up himself, his handful of remaining chips clenched tightly in his hands. He looked as if he could murder the dealer, but in the end stormed off in the opposite direction of the potbelly.

"Well, well—didn't that game turn out all fine and dandy?" the Doctor roared.

The dealer just about managed a smile, though it took his every last remaining drop of self-restraint to do so. When the Doctor rose and turned his back to leave, the dealer's eyes went black immediately.

It's the first time I've ever seen anyone who looks as if they could bite another person's head off, thought Balot.

For, at that precise moment, this was indeed how the dealer looked.

04

"Truly marvelous!" bellowed the Doctor.

They were at the baccarat table. The high rollers' corner. Men puffing on cigars, women sporting jewels and low-cut dresses, all in thrall to the mountainous piles of high-value chips.

–Why did we win? The other side had a higher hand than ours.

The Doctor answered Balot's question as he was raking in the pile of his winnings. "The side whose hand adds up to the number closest to nine wins. The player side only had a four so was obliged to draw another card, which turned out to be a six."

–But four and six make ten—that's closer to nine than you were!

"A hand that adds up to ten is called *baccarat* and equals zero in this game—it's the worst hand possible."

Balot nodded vaguely. Baccarat wasn't one of her designated games, and the rules were now only a faint memory. She was standing right behind the Doctor now, left hand on his shoulder. Her knavish left hand. Oeufcoque could read almost any game in progress and pass the message on through Balot's left hand to the Doctor—this was the setup.

Baccarat was supposed to be a game of pure chance; participants would bet on the player or banker side, trying to guess which one would draw closer to nine. But, of course, once Oeufcoque entered the game the rules went out the window.

He was able to sniff out the people who drew on the player side or the banker side, and use this to work out roughly what cards they had drawn, what numbers they had seen, and what sort of plan they were hatching.

The Doctor had completely grasped every little habit and tell of every player at the table, and said to Balot, "Here you go—some of the winnings. Go have some fun." He passed a whole basket of chips over to Balot.

This was a cue to say that he no longer needed Oeufcoque's help and could manage perfectly on his own now. Balot was impressed as ever by the Doctor's superhuman memory and observational skills, but she couldn't help feeling a little disappointed that she would be walking away from this game without really getting it, without understanding why it was supposed to be so absorbing.

–I'll be at the place you told me, so come and find me if you start losing.

She tapped the Doctor's shoulder as she left. What she really meant, of course, was that he should come and find her if he needed Oeufcoque's help again, but the Doctor just smiled back at her to show that he was invincible.

–We've already reached the figure we need for now. We need to consider the casino as a whole when we make our next move. If we throw one particular game too far out of kilter we'll attract suspicion. So let's not get carried away—you're not here to enjoy yourself.

Oeufcoque seemed to be able to read Balot's thoughts as perceptively as ever, and he communicated this lecture through her left hand again.

Taking her cue, Balot reluctantly left the table. She was playing out a common scene at the high stakes tables. The punter gets drawn in completely, and he throws the woman on his arm a few chips in order to get her out of his hair, telling her to go and kill some time elsewhere.

Balot watched the game from farther back for a while, but it wasn't nearly as much fun. She felt like a left-out child, and before long she wandered off aimlessly. This was the act that she was meant to play—although she did genuinely feel it too. In spite of the barely concealed enthusiasm of the players at the table, she hardly felt interested in the game at all—and it was this more than anything else that made her feel the most disappointed.

It may well have been a deliberate ploy of the casino to make her feel like this, of course. No one liked to feel left out, and she'd be back before long.

Balot walked past the tables and into another room. Before she knew it she was in more plush surroundings with the games around her more expensive. No expense seemed to be spared on the furnishings or the dealers' outfits, and Balot had the distinct feeling that she was now moving closer to the heart of the casino.

She was aiming for the area where the roulette tables were. Men and women of all ages were milling about, the balls chasing the numbers as they spun around. Balot realized that this was it—her first opportunity to fly solo.

The Doctor believed that with Balot's and Oeufcoque's abilities combined, roulette would be the best way to win a large sum of money directly from the casino; it was a game of chance, and no one could dispute the result.

Balot ran through the rules again in her head and started looking for a table when a message appeared in her left hand:

–Sit at table number seven.

It looked like Oeufcoque was onto something. Balot proceeded to the table and took a seat near the dealer. The Doctor had advised her that the closer she was to the roulette wheel, the more likely it was she could use her abilities effectively.

–We're going to win the first spin. They'll make sure of that.

The previous writing on her hand had disappeared to be replaced by a declaration of victory.

Balot passed her chips over to a dealer, who exchanged them for roulette chips.

Balot would be betting with red hundred-dollar chips.

There were three dealers in all. One in charge of the wheel, the other two responsible for exchanging chips, cashing them in, and paying out winnings.

The crowd around this particular table was much sparser than the others, and Balot was the only one at the table. The dealer who exchanged Balot's chips did so solely for Balot.

There had probably just been a big match here, and the crowd must have dispersed the moment the high rollers left the table. Or perhaps the table had been reserved for an entire party who had recently left *en masse*. Either way, Oeufcoque had managed to sniff out a situation that was potentially very much to their advantage.

–Where should I place my bet?

–Wherever you like.

Such was Oeufcoque's reply.

Balot glanced at the dealer. The dealer in charge of the ball.

Balot was surprised to see that she was an older woman. An elegant, beautiful lady. She must have been at least sixty years old, but she stood tall, back straight, and her eyes were a keen blue. She wore a strong, calm expression. The casino had its fair share of female dealers, but she must have been the oldest.

–She's so cool.

Balot was looking down at the roulette layout now but couldn't help herself from sharing her feelings with Oeufcoque.

–According to our data her name is Bell Wing. One of the leading croupiers in the casino world.

–Croupiers?

–It's what they call dealers whose job it is to place the ball into the roulette wheel as it turns.

Even cooler, Balot thought, still looking over the layout.

The green felt in front of her had printed on it the numbers 0, 00, and 1 to 36 in alternating black and red squares, in addition to a number of squares to denote the outside bets.

To one side of the wheel was an electronic scoreboard showing all the numbers that had come up during the last twenty minutes. A form guide. One of the enjoyments in roulette was to try and work out any biases that emerged either in the wheel or due to the way the croupier threw in the ball.

Balot looked at the scoreboard. The last five spins were 14 red, 0 red, 17 black, 30 red, and 23 red. Having glanced at it, she placed a chip on the layout in the space for 2 black. She then threw another one into the mix, which she placed on 14 red.

The old lady, the croupier, took a look at Balot's chips.

She hadn't expected Balot to dive straight in and bet on single numbers, it seemed, and she waited a moment before carefully placing her hand on the roulette wheel.

"Starting," the old lady called in a low, steady voice.

She gripped the handle of the wheel with her left hand and spun it around with a deft movement. It hardly looked like she had put any effort into it at all. At the very same time she threw the ball smoothly in with her right hand. The wheel spun to the right, and the ball spun around within the bowl, traveling in the opposite direction. The numbers flew past in a dizzy whirl, and the ball seemed to slide gracefully against them, the two opposing movements creating a beautiful spiral effect.

Balot thought she might put another chip somewhere on the layout but suddenly stopped herself, transfixed by the rotations.

"No more bets," the old lady called out, preventing any additional bets on this spin.

Chip gripped tightly in her hand, Balot followed the ball with her eyes.

The ball and the wheel seemed to be drawing closer together. Or so she thought, but then the ball ricocheted off one of the eight metal pins that were placed inside the wheel, sending the ball off in a seemingly random direction. It continued on into the wheel just as its rotations were slowing down, and the ball slipped into one of the pockets with apparent ease.

The spinning wheel slowed down again. The numbers were much clearer now, and it was possible to see exactly where the ball had landed.

"Two black," called the old lady. Then the hand that had just smoothly spun the ball was on the table, placing a weighted crystal on the layout over the number that had just won.

Balot was surprised to see the speed with which the other dealers moved to prepare and distribute her winnings.

It was as Oeufcoque had said—she won the first round. *They made sure of that*.

The croupier had seen the number and placed the ball there with astonishing accuracy. Balot had heard stories of such skill but never believed them until just now, having seen it with her own

eyes. An incredible display of ability.

Or it could just have been coincidence. The electronic scoreboard suggested that this was indeed a possibility. It wasn't as if the numbers of the roulette wheel were neatly lined up from 1 to 36. Rather, they were arranged in a seemingly random pattern: 14, 2, 0, 28, 9, 26, 30. Looking at the results of the last five spins, it was possible to detect something of a pattern emerging.

Whether it was due to a biased wheel or some habit of the croupier was hard to tell, but considering that the odds were thirty-six to one normally, it didn't seem beyond the bounds of possibility that she had won legitimately.

Or was it all calculated, part of an act to draw the punter in ever more deeply? Judging by the features of the croupier in charge, it was hard to discount this possibility. She looked every inch the master of her craft.

"Congratulations, madam." One of the other dealers pushed a mountain of chips toward her. Thirty-five times her original stake. Flustered, Balot offered the chip that was her original stake to the dealer. Not to gamble with—as a tip.

–Gosh, what a surprise.

Balot said to Oeufcoque, furtively.

–It felt like someone set you up to win. Probably a trick to draw the crowds in.

Oeufcoque's words backed up Balot's existing suspicions.

Before she realized it, there were people gathering at the table. Thirty-five to one was the best payout there was in roulette—it was the rarest and therefore always interesting. Equally noteworthy were the figures displayed on the electronic scoreboard beside the roulette wheel. Anyone in the know would soon realize that the numbers revealed the distinct possibility of a biased wheel—and this could be exploited.

Would the ball continue to fall in the same area, or would the pattern be interrupted? This was the question, and one that countless keen eyes were now watching to see if they could have answered. It was what made gambling *exciting*.

One by one the chairs at the table filled up, and there were other people who placed their bets while remaining standing. Some placed their own bets on the layout, others called out to the dealers to have them place chips on their behalf. Before long the table was a kaleidoscope of colored chips. Roulette fever had taken hold.

–There are body odors everywhere—it's all one big mess!

Oeufcoque wrote on her hand as normal, but she felt as if he were wailing in despair.

–Let's head over to another table. We've got what we wanted, and the croupier has what she wanted.

–Wait.

Balot held him back.

–I want to play here again. Please?

Balot already had chips in her hand even as she *snarced* him.

–There's no guarantee you'll win again. The croupier had a strange, capricious *smell about her.*

–I want to watch the woman a little longer.

–You're interested in the croupier?

She sensed that Oeufcoque was perplexed, but it didn't stop her from placing another chip on the layout.

She went for a straight bet again, a single number: 14 red.

Balot thought she saw the old lady take in the bet with her eyes.

The more Balot looked at her, the more noble she seemed in appearance and stature. Not some act put on for the job or for the crowds. There was a certain *something* that seemed to radiate from her very core.

Balot was reminded of the manager at her old place of work—the one who gave Balot her name—and also of Queen Bee.

It wasn't that Balot particularly respected these women, and neither looked much like the croupier. She just associated them with each other somehow. That led to another train of thought, and Balot recalled something that a female movie star had once said in a television interview.

The journalist who was interviewing the star had asked her a question: "Would you ever consider plastic surgery to remove your wrinkles, just like so many other stars seem to be doing these days?"

The actress just smiled and said, "I worked hard for these wrinkles."

The words had made a great impression on Balot.

The actress in question had started out in porn before moving into regular acting work, eventually becoming a great star of screen and stage. Balot did of course, given their similar backgrounds, empathize with the actress and respected her too. But there was more than that. The actress exuded a certain mute confidence when she answered the question. *If there's anything in my life that's worth being proud of, then these wrinkles are it,* she seemed to say.

The lady that stood before Balot now seemed to exude the same aura of quiet certainty. Bell Wing. Balot said the name to herself once more. She felt lucky that she had been able to sit down at this table. Nothing to do with whether she was going to win or lose, but a different sort of luck. Just as she felt lucky that it was none other than Oeufcoque and the Doctor who had brought her back from the brink of death after Shell-Septinos nearly killed her.

While Balot was thinking this to herself, the distinguished croupier had spun the wheel in the opposite direction to the previous spin, and likewise the ball.

The two rotated like twin stars, and *No more bets* was called.

Just before the ball was about to fall into place, Balot sensed something—it was as if the ball were moving according to someone's will.

The wheel slowly came to a halt and the winning number was revealed.

"Fourteen red," Bell Wing called out in a steady voice.

The table exploded. It was her second straight up in a row. Another small mountain of chips moved toward her, and her pile of chips looked for a moment like a mound of rose petals.

A hundred-dollar chip, thirty-five to one, twice in a row. The pile didn't include the chips she'd bet or the 5 percent commission that the house took, so that meant a total of $6,600 in front of her.

The other punters seemed to be encouraged by this—*My turn next!*—but Balot just stared at the pile of chips in front of her.

It just seemed too much, as if the money couldn't possibly be hers.

She wasn't there for money in the first place, of course. Money was just the means to the end, a step on the stairway that led up to the real target, and all that the money in front of her really meant was that Balot was one step closer to her goal. Thinking about it this way helped keep Balot calm.

–The next game is going to be tricky. Best leave this table well enough alone now.

Oeufcoque's words rang true, and she saw the sense in them. But Balot wasn't ready to leave the table, not yet. She started to feel that if she was meant to climb the stairway to the top, step by step, then she might as well enjoy the journey and value each step for what it was.

–I want to stay here just a little longer. I won't use up all our winnings or anything, I promise. Please.

Oeufcoque seemed to think deeply on this, and he paused before he replied.

–Just remember that your winnings so far are still a long way off from our overall target.

He made no further attempt to make Balot leave.

Balot thanked him and took the next chips in her hand.

She slipped them onto the tableau: 14 red, 2 black. Some of the other punters were watching her to try and ride her coat tails, others figured third time unlucky, and others still were in discussion about the law of averages and how they applied to this table.

Then the ball was thrown in. The wheel spun to the left, the ball to the right. The white ball against the red and black wheel of fortune. The numbers melted together, the ball hit one of the pins, and an invisible hand reached out from the thirty-eight pockets to pull the ball in, one of them ready and waiting to welcome it.

The ball bounced off the dome in the middle and fell.

The ball and the wheel became one.

There was a collective sigh. The wheel stopped, and the winning number was revealed.

Bell Wing had her crystal dolly in her hand.

"Fifteen black."

The dolly was placed on the layout, over the winning number. The winners' chips were distributed, and the chips that Balot had staked were taken away by one of the dealers.

"You were so close." The voice came out of nowhere, it seemed, and it took a moment for Balot to realize that the words had been directed toward her.

Balot raised her head and looked at Bell Wing. Bell Wing, in turn, was looking at Balot. But the croupier had no more to say and shifted her attention back to the rest of the table.

–There's nothing close about it.

Oeufcoque was the one to say these words, but Balot was already thinking them.

Fifteen black was almost directly opposite 14 red on the wheel.

More importantly, Balot couldn't work out why Bell Wing had chosen to speak to her.

Was she trying to determine whether the punter that she had used to draw the crowds was the type who might get greedy and go for broke? Or was she trying to demonstrate to Balot that she could manipulate the ball at will and send it to whichever corner she wished?

–Are you going again?

–The first time I won it was because she let me. Now, I want to win for myself. It was a strong answer from Balot. She felt confident that she could do it. She had learned all the strategies the Doctor had taught her. More than that, though, she felt a desire welling up inside herself—a desire to use her newfound abilities, to exploit them fully, to *win*.

–I think I* can, *you see.

–Well, I'm here to back you up to the hilt.

Oeufcoque's answer revealed that he understood what Balot was feeling.

Balot squeezed the chip in her hand before calmly placing it on the tableau.

Chapter 8

EXPLOSION

Balot now adopted a different strategy. She started aiming for the lower payouts, bets that would double or triple her stake.

She was currently going after the even money bets that ran down the side of the numbers on the layout.

There were three types of bets. Low/high—that is, 1-18 or 19-36. Odds/evens. Black/red.

Each resulted in a doubling of the original stake. Balot was mainly sticking to low/high as she took in the sensations of the wheel, the ball, and Bell Wing's fingertips.

There were a number of points she was to take note of, and Oeufcoque conveyed what these were by writing on her left hand. The angle of the bowl's incline, the shape and number of the metal pins, and the slope of the dome inside the wheel. On top of that she also had to pay attention to the depth of the pockets and note whether they were cushioned or not.

The bias in how the ball landed was determined by the wheel and how it was spun. If the bowl were shallow, the ball wouldn't bounce as much on its way down. The metallic pins were easier to read when they were shaped like rods, and the fewer of them there were, the easier it was to predict the path of the ball as it ricocheted off them. The steeper the incline on the dome, the more likely the ball was to fall straight down; the deeper the pockets—and the more padding they had—the less likely the ball was to bounce back out of the pocket.

The table that Balot was currently sitting at passed muster on all these points. The wheel was level, and the bowl wasn't too deep. There were four cylindrical rods, four diamond-shaped ones. The angle of the dome's incline was more or less forty-five degrees exactly. The pockets were a little over five millimeters deep.

If the wheel had been less ideal then Balot had planned on giving up immediately to find greener pastures elsewhere. But instead she found herself fired up, ready for a challenge

In response to her newfound determination, Oeufcoque's writing disappeared from her hand to be replaced with something useful: the number of rotations.

The number of times the ball went around and the number of times the wheel went around.

All the while Balot's bets were progressing steadily from bets that paid double her stake to those that paid triple.

Column bets: choosing one of the three lines of numbers to bet on, excluding the 0 and the 00.

Douzaine bets: choosing one of 1-12, 13-24, or 25-36. This also paid out triple her original stake.

Weaving backward and forward from one of these bets to the other, Balot and Oeufcoque gradually started piecing together a picture of how the croupier spun both the wheel and the ball.

The ball would almost always do between eighteen and twenty rotations. In particular, whenever the croupier focused on the spin, it would be closer to eighteen full rotations. Oeufcoque calculated the amount of time it took from the ball's release to when it first started dipping, all the while computing the odds that it would hit a particular pin and the angle at which it was most likely to hit the bowl.

There were three key factors involved in the spin. Three states: the numbers were easily visible, or they could *just* be made out when following them around, or they were blurred beyond

perception. After watching a number of full spins, Balot and Oeufcoque found they could work out the point at which one state transitioned to another.

It wasn't an easy task to pinpoint it exactly—but it was absolutely essential if Oeufcoque and Balot were to stand a chance in predicting the croupier's habits.

All the while, numbers were appearing inside the glove on Balot's right hand.

Oeufcoque's magic numbers.

The numbers contained in each of the eight segments of the wheel, divided according to the positions of the pins. Each segment was given a name, and the idea was to accurately predict the path of the ball as it bounced from one segment to another.

First there was North Side: 25-29-12-8.

Then North East: 19-31-18-6-21.

Followed by East Side: 14-2-0-28-9,

South East: 14-2-0-28-9,

South Side: 26-30-11-7,

South West: 20-32-17-5-22,

West Side: 34-15-3-24-36,

and North West: 13-1-00-27-10.

There was a fine line between success and total failure, and the difference would come down to whether they were able to determine, in an instant, which segment the ball was heading for.

This was where Oeufcoque really came into his own.

Every time the ball fell, he could highlight in an instant which segment it would hit.

Furthermore, this was hardly cheating. Any player was allowed to have a crib sheet at the table with them, showing the arrangement of the numbers. Indeed, it was fair to say it was standard practice among regulars.

You could even buy official guide sheets containing such information—and much more besides—at the casino's own kiosks or in the hotel lobby.

The question was not whether you were allowed this information, but whether you could you use it quickly and accurately enough for it to be useful.

And could you then go on to use that information to work out how the angle of the ball—as it ricocheted off the pins—would vary according to when and how the ball and wheel were spun.

The table was divided into four blocks, and if, for example, 00 (in block A) was at position B when the ball started to fall, you were talking about a spin of roughly ninety degrees, or one quarter of a full rotation of the wheel.

Oeufcoque was able to perform complex calculations to cut out the intermediary steps and focus on just the crucial factor: the point in the rotation at which the ball would fall into the wheel.

When Bell Wing put her mind to it, this was at the point of a full rotation: 360 degrees. Otherwise, it was almost always around the ninety-degree mark.

There were some variations in results, of course. But these outcomes were because Bell Wing was deliberately manipulating the spin. Oeufcoque could tell this because these were the only times when the ball seemed to move with a different sort of *motive* than usual. The motive being to deliberately inject some variety into the figures.

The better the croupier, the more constant the spin and therefore the easier it was for the numbers to start falling into a predictable pattern. That was why the croupiers were under strict orders from the house to ensure that there were deliberate variations in the number of rotations,

the speed of the wheel, and the angle at which the ball hit the wheel.

Hardly any croupiers were skilled enough to do this with 100 percent accuracy when customers were around and the chips were down. Still, Bell Wing was exceedingly precise. Balot found it somewhat ironic, therefore, that it was the croupier's very accuracy and precision that allowed Oeufcoque to pick up on her movements and intentions. In other words, it was precisely *because* Bell Wing was so skilled that Oeufcoque was able to get the measure of her game so quickly.

Normally it would have taken even the most experienced professional many hours and tens of thousands of dollars in bets before they had a chance of working out what Balot and Oeufcoque had already managed to learn.

Balot succeeded because of the intense training she'd had from the Doctor and of course because she had Oeufcoque in hand. It took her less than an hour and less than ten grand in bets. With this minimal outlay of time and funds, Balot had learned all the biases of the wheel, the unconscious habits of the croupier, and even the nature of the house orders—the fiat from on high that compelled croupiers to mix things up a little.

Balot felt all this *through her skin*.

Step by step she raised the stakes and started betting on longer and longer odds.

She bet on the line—placing her chips over one of the lines on the layout, signifying a bet on all six numbers down the line, with a payout of 5:1 when she won.

She placed a five-number bet on 0, 00, and numbers 1-3, payout 6:1.

She placed a corner bet; her chips down where four numbers intersected. Payout 8:1.

She bet on the street: three numbers—payout 11:1.

She went further, betting on longer and longer odds even if she didn't win.

Split: betting on two numbers, payout 17:1.

Then back to the straight bet, the single number, payout 35:1.

She didn't win these bets—they were reliant more on luck than skill at this stage. They were feints, for the benefit of the croupier and the other punters.

On top of that there were other ways of betting. Regional variations to the rules, as seen in some Continental casinos. Within Eggnog Blue, however, this particular table was the only place the variations were seen—Bell Wing had no doubt persuaded the house to permit them at her table.

The permitted variations were threefold. One was *finaal*—a bet on the last digit. So, if the player called "finaal plein three," informing one of the dealers of his intentions, he'd be betting a hundred dollars on numbers 3, 13, 23, and 33. This bet had a payout of between 8:1 and 11:1.

There was also the *jeu zero*. Playing on and around the 0, as the name suggested, this bet involved the three numbers, totaling six, on either side: 35-14-2-0-28-9-26. Four hundred-dollar chips would pay out thirty of the same if the ball landed on the 26, or if it landed on any of the other numbers. This bet, though, was much more relevant on the Continental wheel layout and not much use here unless you were particularly paranoid about the dealer aiming for the 0.

The third variation on standard rules was the *en prison* rule on evens bets, where a 0 would cause all evens bets to be frozen rather than simply lost. The player would then have the option of either having half their original bet back or letting it ride through to the next spin.

Balot exploited this rule to the fullest, and whenever she aimed for the 0 she also placed an evens bet at the same time.

She did so to keep her losses to a minimum even as she moved to a more aggressive style of play, but more importantly, to get some real clues as to the croupier's mindset.

–Really impressive.

Suddenly, and for the first time since they had sat down at the table, Oeufcoque communicated in words other than simple instructions.

–What is?

–You are.

–I am?

–I do believe we really have a chance. We could even end up with the money we need to move on to the next level.

–That's what I was aiming for all along. Was that wrong of me?

Balot felt rather insecure all of a sudden, but Oeufcoque assuaged her feelings.

–No, just carry on the best you can. There's not much I can do either way, at this stage.

Balot felt somewhat happier and *snarced* him again.

–I just have this feeling that I know where the ball is going to land.

–You can predict it?

–More of a gut feeling.

Just then: "Is this your first time at roulette, young lady?" The voice came as one of the dealers was distributing the table's winnings after a spin.

Balot looked up at the speaker.

This time Bell Wing stared at her intently.

–Yes, ma'am, Balot answered truthfully. If Bell Wing glanced at Balot's electronic voicebox around her neck, she said nothing about it.

Instead, Bell Wing continued in a different vein. "Your eyes are sparkling. As if everything is new to you. I can see that you're enjoying watching the ball as it spins around."

Balot nodded. This *was* how she actually felt, after all. She was genuinely getting into the game. But there was another factor.

–I'm enjoying the game because you're the croupier.

Bell Wing gave a small nod of acknowledgement. *Thank you*, she seemed to say. A generous gesture.

"Still, you're planning something big, aren't you?" said Bell Wing. "Have you got something against this casino? A grudge?"

–Why do you say that?

"It's not me who's saying it. It's your chips."

Reflexively Balot shot a glance down at her chips. Then she peered back up at Bell Wing. Balot realized she had goose bumps. Just as she had been reading Bell Wing and the table, Bell Wing had been reading *her*.

How much had Bell Wing noticed? Everything, no doubt. Balot's betting patterns, habits, personality. Balot realized this and tried not to show it on her face.

"It's the croupier's job to read her customers' minds by the way they bet."

–It's nothing personal against you, ma'am.

Balot's reply was instant, and Bell Wing's lips rose in a smile for the first time. "So why did you choose my table?"

–Because I thought you were cool. Another immediate reply.

Bell Wing said nothing more and turned her hand back to the wheel.

Her eyes flashed.

Balot sensed that the croupier's whole body wanted to move along with her eyes, to focus on a single point. That single point was a number on the layout—the number that she would be aiming for next spin.

Two black. The first number that Balot had placed a chip on, and the win that she had been *allowed*.

Bell Wing's hand moved for the ball. Balot's hand moved in response. Balot's chips came down as the wheel was spun.

The ball was released, and it sped into the bowl in a smooth movement. The numbers melted into one, and Balot realized that the angle of descent was going to be steeper than she had originally anticipated.

Hastily Balot grabbed another chip to follow the ball, but the moment had passed.

"No more bets." A dignified voice stayed Balot's hand.

Before long the wheel swallowed the ball. The rotation slowed down and then stopped completely.

"Three red," Bell Wing called out calmly.

The dolly was placed on the layout, and chips were collected and distributed against the rustling backdrop.

Balot's five-hundred-dollar stake was swallowed up by the ocean of chips.

Again, Balot felt Bell Wing notice her, even if the croupier didn't actually look at her this time.

Balot pursed her lips to show her disappointment. She was acting, of course. She did feel disappointed, but it was hard to tell what was really the cause of her scowl.

Bell Wing's movements had been a feint. She had noticed Balot's observations and drawn her into betting on the wrong number—a sophisticated ploy.

Bell Wing stood there calmly and asked Balot a question. She asked whether Balot still thought she was "cool," even after pulling a stunt such as this one. Balot couldn't help smiling back.

Bell Wing responded to Balot's smile with a cold gaze. "This is my job, you know."

–I understand.

"There's such a thing as a craftsman's pride in doing your job properly. I have it. I also have a duty. So I'm going to obstruct you. Don't think that you won the first game because I was being kind to you. I was just doing my job. Now that you know all this, don't you think you'd be better off at another table?"

It was more than Balot had expected. Bell Wing had her number, completely, and didn't care who knew it. She had made her feelings clear: *I have no intention of letting you win any more at this table and will do everything I can to stop you.*

Balot touched her choker with her hand to release her voice.

–I'd like to stay here and play a little longer, if that's all right with you.

"Do you think that I'm somehow going to help you?"

–A game is a game. I'll just learn from you as we go along.

"Learn from me?"

Balot nodded. She found her own articulateness a little unexpected, but she continued.

–Yes. I don't know what exactly. But I have a feeling that I'll be able to pick up something useful.

Bell Wing nodded. "Fine. If it means that much to you, I won't try and stop you. But don't say I didn't warn you. If your luck turns sinister, don't expect any mercy."

–Sinister?

But Bell Wing didn't answer.

She turned back to the wheel and touched the bowl.

This woman, this wheel, this game—they were all so *interesting*. Balot was suddenly overwhelmed by emotion. It was unstoppable. She had no idea where it would lead her.

–Take care, Balot, Oeufcoque warned her. For a moment she was concerned that Oeufcoque might try and stop her, and she *snarced* him back vigorously.

–I'm going to play at this table and win. This is what I want.

–Your opponent is well attuned to your feelings at the moment. To your aggression. She's completely prepared for you.

–Aggression?

It was only when Oeufcoque spelled it out in so many words that Balot realized that aggression was, indeed, the emotion that she was feeling.

She *let go* and saw her feelings dissipate into the ether. Bell Wing would have been able to use Balot's aggression to her advantage—just like she had with the 3 red a minute ago—and Balot knew it.

What Balot needed now was not aggression but *certainty*. Knowing where the ball would land with *certainty*.

–I want to win this game. I won't cause you any trouble, I promise. Please. Let me do this.

–Our opponent's feelings are difficult to read. She smells as if she's sure about something. But I can't tell what.

–I think I know what she's sure of.

–What?

–She's sure of the ball spinning.

Oeufcoque seemed bewildered.

–But I know the ball is spinning too…

The words rose up in Balot's hands. Balot smiled.

Bell Wing turned the wheel of fortune and sent the ball forth like an arrow.

Balot felt like she had become some sort of a gun. Picking out the fateful numbers with her chips would be just like honing in on her target in shooting practice. If her aim was off, she could adjust, take stock, recalibrate, fire again, realigning from left to right until she finally found her target.

Balot placed her bets on North West: 13-1-00-27-10. Five hundred dollars on each number.

On top of that she placed another five hundred dollars on black.

The bowl swallowed the ball: 29 black.

Two places off.

Balot received her winnings on the five hundred she had on black and plowed this straight back into the next hand.

For the next hand she bet on the North Side: 25-29-12-8, another five hundred dollars each.

She also placed five hundred each on two-way splits on 25-26, 29-30, and 11-12. And five hundred on red.

"Thirty red," called Bell Wing.

A 17:1 payout on the split, and doubles on the red—Balot was looking at a total return of nine thousand dollars. She was now up by over $2,200. She'd guessed the ball would be sent the other way and had bet accordingly.

Balot watched the wheel as it spun around. She felt the difference in speed and angle with her skin.

Balot watched Bell Wing's every move, chips gripped tightly in her hand.

The wheel was spun in the opposite direction to the previous spin and likewise the ball.

Balot's hands moved.

Five hundred dollars each, speedily, on the South Side: 26-30-11-7.

Then another five hundred each on 28, 9, 20, and 32.

At this point the ball was on its fifth lap of the wheel. There was still over a minute before the game would be over.

The ball went around another ten times, then fell into the bowl when the wheel slowed down.

Bell Wing's eyes narrowed in an instant.

"Seventeen black."

Four thousand dollars' worth of Balot's chips were swallowed whole by the table.

The crowd around the table was now starting to heat up. Any table would have done the same in the face of such high stakes flying back and forth.

Bell Wing remained cool amid the excitement. She looked at the number Balot had bet on, and then back at the roulette wheel.

Seventeen black was right next to 32 red—the last number that Balot had bet on.

Balot felt that she had just experienced Bell Wing's skill at yet another level. Bell Wing had taken into account the bias on the wheel and caused the ball to land right outside Balot's chosen numbers.

Balot had no proof of this, of course, but she felt it—with *certainty*.

The ball was released. It was poetry in motion, sheer beauty, all of it: the form of the wheel, its build, the angles, the elegant curvature of Bell Wing's fingers, the rotating ball, the numbers spinning on the wheel.

Balot lined her chips up with her fingers.

She placed five hundred dollars each on 14-2-0.

She didn't feel the need to place any more.

The ball spun round, smooth, violent.

Bell Wing's gaze followed Balot's every movement, daggers in her eyes.

The ball bounced off against a pin and fell.

The wheel spun around, and by and by it showed the fateful number.

"Zero."

The table erupted. Balot was the only person to have bet on 0. Everyone else either lost their stakes or found them *en prison*.

Balot's winnings, at 35:1, were stacked in front of her. Over fifteen thousand dollars' worth.

"Your chips look like a giant pile of wood shavings, don't they?" Bell Wing asked quietly.

Balot was worried that Bell Wing might be angry, but when she realized that Bell Wing was no

such thing she smiled at her.

"So, think you've got the measure of the wheel?"

Balot nodded.

–It's very level.

"Yes. Yes, it is. Too level, in fact. Its only bias is luck."

–Luck?

"To put it in terms of probability, it's unlikely in the extreme that the ball will continue to fall in any sort of predictable way, over time. Rather, you'll be looking at an average distribution. It's a struggle. Fighting against Fortuna herself." Bell Wing seemed to exercise her jaw, moving her chin from left to right. "To a greater or lesser extent, all croupiers enjoy watching their customers crash and burn. Whether they're old or young, male or female, all people have this desire to dominate others. With croupiers, it's a particularly cunning sort of desire." Bell Wing continued in a disinterested tone, yet her words seemed to affect Balot deeply.

But your voice is so clear, Balot thought. *How can you speak such depressing thoughts with such a clear tone?*

–Why does someone like you work in a casino like this?

Balot hadn't meant to vocalize this, but the words had come out anyway.

"What do you know about this casino?"

Balot was silent. She wasn't ready to pour her heart out and explain what she and Oeufcoque and the Doctor were all doing at the casino, and she certainly didn't want to talk about Shell and OctoberCorp.

"I see… You have a grudge against the boss." Bell Wing's eyes creased at the corners as she spoke. Balot's eyes, on the other hand, flew open.

"The manager of this casino doesn't concern me. I needed money, so I took a job. My husband was ill, you see. He wasn't of our world—he was an honest man. Not that he wasn't like me in many respects; he had a cunning and greedy streak. Even so, all his children were left with when he died were his teachings—and each other. He did well on that point, at least, taught them well. But it was left to me to bring the money in."

Bell Wing seemed as if she were about to bring the conversation to an end. But then, whether she changed her mind or whether she was simply waiting for the two dealers to finish distributing the chips, she continued. "After my husband died, I felt that everything was taking a turn for the sinister. So I did what I had to in order to find a way of turning *right*. That's why I ended up staying here, rolling the ball."

–Sinister?

Balot asked the same question she had before.

Bell Wing averted her eyes from Balot. Balot thought that she was going to refuse to answer again, but Bell Wing did speak, with her eyes fixed to the roulette wheel. "The wheel of fortune can spin two ways. When it spins counterclockwise, to the left, it's sinister. It brings bad luck. Clockwise, to the right, brings joy. My life now is about trying to find what happiness I can by calling up the *right*."

She sounded almost as if she were talking to the wheel.

Then she touched the wheel. She spun the numbers for another battle, and released the ball. The wheel spun to the left, the ball to the right.

Balot picked up on the movements and grabbed her chips. She was ready to place her

thousand-dollar chips down, and she thought to herself that *this was something that she had decided on for herself*. Oeufcoque had suggested they switch tables, and even Bell Wing had warned her to leave. Yet Balot had stayed—it was what she wanted and what she *valued*.

It was just like when she was back at Paradise, when she took on the giant pool and all its attendant risks in order to determine the whereabouts of Shell's lost memories. *Her choice*.

Balot's chips were placed on North West 13-1.

Straight bets, one thousand dollars on each.

Bell Wing looked at the ball as it spun around the circumference of the wheel, then closed her eyes. "My luck seems to have taken a turn for the sinister again," she said, her voice detached. "No more bets," she called out, her voice as clear and soft as ever.

The ball touched a pin, then fell to the right.

It hit the bowl that was spinning counterclockwise, slid over the dome, and was sucked in.

The atmosphere at the table was electric. The dealers could only stop and stare. They were like market stallholders helplessly standing by during a riot, watching their shops being looted bare by the angry crowds.

Bell Wing picked up the crystal. "One red," she called.

The chips on the table seemed to dance around wildly before settling down in a single location: right in front of Balot. A total of thirty-four thousand dollars after deductions.

Bell Wing watched the pile of chips with silent eyes.

–Could you please spin the wheel clockwise this time, ma'am?

Balot spoke.

Bell Wing lifted her gaze from the mountain of chips to Balot's face.

–I'll try and win again.

Balot spoke without arrogance, without pride. Just matter of fact. One of the dealers turned to Bell Wing with a jolt when he heard this.

Bell Wing just stood up straight. "What's your name?"

–Rune-Balot, ma'am.

"I'll take note of it. I'm Bell Wing."

Balot nodded.

"I was just thinking how nice it would be to have a granddaughter just like you. All my grandchildren are boys, you see."

Balot was a little surprised at this sudden revelation. So, it seemed, were the other dealers at the table.

Bell Wing continued. "If you ever feel like spinning the wheel for yourself, come and see me. Whatever casino you like—just head for the best croupier there and say you want to become Bell Wing's apprentice. With a little bit of luck you might find I'll teach you everything I know."

No doubt the dealers who were working the table with her had never heard such words from her before. They just stood there, slack-jawed, looking from Bell Wing's face back to Balot's.

–Thank you.

Balot answered, and Bell Wing's eyes narrowed.

"Now, I'll spin to the right." Bell Wing waited for the previous round's chips to be fully distributed, then touched the wheel with the opposite hand from before.

That was the cue for the table to quiet down again. Bell Wing's fingertips spun the cylinder ever so softly. Clockwise, to the right. Balot watched, missing nothing.

Bell Wing did her job with a master craftsman's pride. Like a *prima donna* taking to the stage.

And, in fact, this would be the last time Bell Wing would perform at this casino.

"I'm just a Continental croupier, born and raised. From one of those small towns where everyone worked either at the casino, the golf course, or the whiskey distillery." Bell Wing was murmuring now. "And do you know what? I think I'd like to carry on plying my trade for some time to come. Maybe in a casino with a better atmosphere."

Balot placed her chips as she listened to the words being spoken. All on one number. She felt no inclination to bet on any other number or add any more chips to the pile. The crowd around the table responded immediately to the ten thousand dollar bet she had placed. The number she had laid her bet on was inundated with various hues of chips, like ants to sugar.

"Rune-Balot," Bell Wing called.

–Yes, ma'am.

"Keep on striving to ensure your luck turns to the right."

–Yes, ma'am.

"Don't fret too much about it. It's just like striving toward womanhood."

–What do I need to do?

"Be where you need to be, when you need to be there. Wear the clothes you need to wear, say the words you need to say, have the right hairstyle, the right jewelry. Womanhood and luck are essentially the same thing. The better you are at riding your own luck, the more of a woman you'll become. Make your luck turn to the right."

She spoke calmly, and by the end of her speech the ball was starting to slacken.

"No more bets." Bell Wing's voice echoed clearly.

The ball, moving to the left, hit a pin.

The blur of the wheel was starting to slow, and that which had been an indistinct mass now separated out into individual numbers.

The ball found its way home into the bowl, toward the pocket, its final destination. From counterclockwise to clockwise. Or so it seemed to Balot.

A roar went up at the table.

Bell Wing cut across the noise with the crystal in her hand.

"Two black."

As she called out the result, she placed the dolly right next to the pile of accumulated chips; there wasn't even space on the layout anymore. The whole table was cheering as if they had hit the jackpot on the slots and won one of the luxury cars. Chips clattered all around, but Bell Wing's voice still cut clearly across the hubbub of the celebrating crowd.

"I couldn't see it," she said, looking at Balot. "Which way is it turning?"

Balot looked at the three-hundred-something-thousand-dollar payout in front of her and answered.

–If you're talking about my luck, I think it's turning to the right, ma'am.

Quietly, Bell Wing nodded. "Now, it's time for you to go. This table's dead to you now, and to me too, for that matter. You've just experienced the last game Bell Wing will ever run at this casino." She looked straight at Balot as she said this, calm and collected to the end.

One of the other dealers stood behind Bell Wing, distributing the table's winnings. The dealer that had just listened in on their conversation. Dealers from the other tables gathered around, and one of them took over at what had been, up until that moment, Bell Wing's roulette table.

Bell Wing stood up straight and walked coolly away from the table.

–The woman paid out on your straight bets time after time. All she has to look forward to is a reprimand from the pit boss, followed by a formal inquiry, Oeufcoque said as Balot left the table, arms full of chips.

–Will she lose her job, do you think? Because of us?

–She could. Not that she seemed that bothered by it, though. In fact, I smelled a sort of liberated feeling coming from her. She's probably used to this sort of situation.

–Used to it?

As soon as Balot heard the words she looked up to see if she could see Bell Wing. It wasn't a very nice thing to be *used to*, surely. It was a sad thought.

Oeufcoque picked up on Balot's feelings.

–Bell Wing is one of the best croupiers in the business. She'll be all right. We can worry about her all we like, but it's not going to help her one bit, and in any case she won't want our sympathy… It seemed that Oeufcoque was speaking in order to try and comfort Balot, but then he suddenly changed tack.*–In any case, the numbers that she spun were looking* rightward*, weren't they?* Oeufcoque spoke tentatively, as if he didn't really understand the concepts that the two women had been discussing.

–I think so.

–Well, it's up to us to do our job now. She's certainly done hers.

Finally Balot seemed convinced, and she nodded.

Just at that moment she felt someone approach her from behind. She spun around to find the Doctor grinning at her.

"Well, well, somebody's made quite an impression!" the Doctor said, smiling broadly.

–I'm sorry.

"No, no." The Doctor shook his head. Very politely. It seemed that the Doctor knew *exactly* just how many chips Balot had won. "It was about time we ramped things up a notch and got ready for the real fight anyway. Let's get serious. Having said that—" the Doctor paused, indicating his surroundings with a subtle gesture—"I'm sure that quite a few of these people looking at you want to come up and congratulate you, maybe learn your secret. Probably best we make tracks."

Balot realized that all eyes were on her. The dealers and the pit bosses, who looked at her warily, and the other punters, who mainly just seemed fascinated by her.

"They're not people you particularly want to meet, trust me on this one," the Doctor said, walking off toward reception. "Some of them will be professional gamblers who want to recruit you into their gang, and others will just be angling for secrets on making a quick buck. We need to play it cool."

Balot followed after the Doctor silently. The chips were chinking inside the basket she held to her chest. Eyes all around the room were following the basket of chips—and Balot. They wanted both.

–I'm confident that I'd be able to win all we need at roulette, Balot said, as if to distract herself from all the unwanted attention.

–Even if millions were at stake, I'd still get it right.

"I'm sure you would, but that wouldn't help us reach our goal one bit." It was Oeufcoque who replied. Her partner was as sensitive as ever to her feelings. "The croupiers in charge aren't idiots. They'd just change the wheel's spin to make it impossible for even you to predict, or they might even use a special machine if they thought they needed to do so in order to bring you down."

–But…

"In any case, we can't get hold of the chips that we need from a roulette table, however many piles of chips we win. We're not professionals out to win big from the casino. We have to remember that we're here for a legitimate reason: *Scramble 09*."

–Okay…

Balot felt the tension and worry dissipate from her body. She understood.

The one thing that Balot was never likely to get used to was other people seeing her as an object of convenience. She'd do everything she could to avoid this, close her eyes, shut away the world.

But what if even Oeufcoque and the Doctor saw her as a useful object?

When would they start treating her as one? The moment must come eventually, and she was so terrified of it that she wanted to disappear from the two forever.

Why was she suddenly thinking like this? Was it because she had just met an extraordinary woman in Bell Wing? The thoughts swirled around Balot's mind. Balot was a long way off from having the sort of composure you needed to be able to walk away from a table, unperturbed that you had just been beaten, just as Bell Wing had done a minute ago.

She also lacked the sort of compassion that Oeufcoque had—if *she'd* been abused so roughly by her user, she doubted whether she could be so understanding as to come back and work in the hands of her erstwhile abuser.

She was thinking about all this at reception while she had her chips changed into more manageable denominations, when the Doctor said something to her out of the blue.

"So, it looks like you make that sort of face too."

Balot had no idea what he was talking about. She looked up.

"I'm talking about your face when you were locked in your battle with the croupier back there."

–What do you mean?

Balot's face turned sour.

"You had a sharp, fearsome look about you. Almost as if you didn't need us anymore. Now I *know* I made the right decision in bringing you here." He passed Balot the basket full of ten-thousand-dollar chips, her stash.

While Balot was trying to work out what he meant, the Doctor took off toward the box bar. He peered this way and that, whistling at the more impressive games, every inch the hooked gambler. It was hard to tell whether it was an act anymore.

Balot trailed behind him, and they sat down in a semi-private box booth, shielded by black screens. One that you could sit in regardless of the games going on either side.

"What do you want to drink?" the Doctor asked. Balot pointed at the menu. The Doctor ordered for both of them using the microphone built into the table. When he finished ordering it was Balot's turn to ask a question.

–What do you mean by a fearsome look?

"Hmm?"

–My face—when I was playing roulette.

"Uh. What's the best way to put it…"

–You were looking at something that only you could see, interjected Oeufcoque through the microphone.

–I don't understand.

–I think the Doctor's getting a little bit concerned that as you start to realize your full potential, we'll become increasingly redundant, until finally we're out of a job.

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders, half in jest. As if to say *That wouldn't actually be so bad.*

At that point a waitress came carrying a tray with two glasses. The Doctor tipped her generously and winked. Every bit the accomplished player. The waitress placed the tip into her cleavage and sauntered away, giving the Doctor a generous shake of her derriere as his reward.

Balot watched this scene play out—what else could she do?—and then replied with her honest reaction to Oeufcoque's words.

–It'd be a terrible thing if you two disappeared from my life right now.

She wasn't saying this to be nice or to suck up to them.

The Doctor picked up his glass and smiled. "Well, I should hope so. If we were dispensable, we'd be pretty useless as *Scramble 09* Trustees. We'd be *disposed of* immediately, or at the very least thrown straight in the slammer."

–So what did Oeufcoque mean just then by "redundant"?

"Well, you do have the right, you know. Whenever you like. The right to fire us and hire a different set of Trustees. All you have to do is head on over to the Broilerhouse and just say the word. You could even use some of your war chest that you've just won to hire our replacements."

–Why would I want to do a thing like that?

"Don't you want to?"

Balot's shoulders sagged. Why were the Doctor and Oeufcoque being like this? It was completely different from earlier. She had no idea what was going on, how to read the situation. It was like the time she was suddenly told *goodbye* without any warning…

–Why?

"Well, from our point of view we'd rather you didn't, of course. That's why we appeal to our *usefulness*—we think we're the best in the business, and we have to prove it to you."

Balot nodded. It *was* what they were doing.

"You're a Concerned Party in this case," continued the Doctor.

Balot nodded again.

"You've hired us to fight an injustice committed against you and to bring the offenders to heel."

She nodded a third time.

"And now you've taken it upon yourself to solve the case on your own."

This time, Balot didn't nod. She wondered whether this was all because she had just won so much at roulette. Had she angered the Doctor and Oeufcoque without even realizing it? As she thought this, she was overcome by a wave of desolation. All expression drained from her face, and she withdrew into her shell, staring at the Doctor from inside her husk.

–You're starting to wake up to your own potential. That's all the Doctor is trying to say, said Oeufcoque. The words jolted her out of her stupor, and she squeezed both hands tightly.

–The Doctor didn't see you in action back at the hideaway, with all your incredible

marksmanship. This is the first time he's seen you in your full glory. He feels a sense of responsibility for what you've become, explained Oeufcoque.

–Responsibility?

–Say if you were to start using your abilities for selfish reasons. The Doctor would be obligated to freeze your abilities, and he'd be taken off your case whether he liked it or not.

Balot's hair stood on end. She felt cold all over. This was the first time that Oeufcoque had alluded to the incident in which she had abused him so—the first time she felt she was being properly admonished. Balot stared at her hands—at Oeufcoque.

But.

–Don't worry. You'll develop, and learn, Oeufcoque said, as if he were gently easing Balot's guilty conscience by taking it upon himself.*–You'll discover and then master your abilities at a rate that will leave the Doctor and me trailing far behind you. There will be times when something is impossible for us but possible for you. The only thing we're concerned about is that you don't get* burnt out *along the way*.

–Burnt out?

–We're now moving into the final phase of our plan vis-a-vis this casino, said Oeufcoque, his voice stern.*–All the Doctor and I can do is our best, to the limits of our abilities. Your job is to make it so that we* can *do what we couldn't do without you.*

"Don't worry—it'll be perfectly possible," added the Doctor. Balot looked up from her hands. "Or rather, there will come a point when it *will* be possible for you to do it. The question is not *if*, but *when*. And, more importantly, how you'll feel when the moment comes. Which way will your feet be pointing?"

–That's what you mean by "burnt out"?

"Yes—that's human psychology for you. What will you do once you have the proof we need to arrest Shell? If you're too involved, too burnt out, you might feel reluctant to press the advantage, and that could ruin everything."

Balot's brows knitted again. Not that she felt bad in any way. She felt that she owed these two something. An apology for thinking that it was they who wanted to use her, perhaps. She realized that it was just her own guilty conscience that had been putting these sorts of thoughts in her mind.

–Do you think I'd suddenly go all soft on you? It's *me we're talking about here.*

"Well, sure, but…" The Doctor stuck his lower lip out, and his sentence trailed away into a mumble.

–I think I'm burnt out through and through.

Balot's face had turned harsh without her realizing it.

–So I think that once I start running, I'm not going to be able to stop. But I really don't want to cause you two any trouble. Do you think we should leave it here?

"What's your ultimate goal?" The Doctor answered her question with one of his own.

Balot thought as she stared at her glass of cinnamonade. What she *wanted* was simple enough. But what it *meant* was something altogether different, and she wasn't sure if she could put it into words.

–It's just as I said to Tweedledee and the others.

Eventually she took her eyes off the glass.

–To Professor Faceman too. When I left Paradise. I told them that I needed to solve my

own case. That's what I feel, anyway. I won't be able to live anywhere properly unless I do so. That's why I need Shell's past…

Suddenly Balot felt cold again. Not just her skin this time, though. In her gut too. She realized that she wanted to *kill*. She understood this clearly, for the first time. Or rather, the Doctor and Oeufcoque had made her understand.

–It's quite possible that when you achieve your goal, someone else will be destroyed by it, Oeufcoque added, quietly.

–He could have his basic human rights and assets frozen and lose his liberty for a very long time. More than one of the people we've sent to prison have tried to take their own lives. Of course, there have been others who were made of sterner stuff, recidivists who come out after their sentence and carry on as before. But even those have lost a part of themselves to us. Were they burnt out? Hard to say. The Doctor and I carry our own burdens too, of course. Now—we chose our paths, however reluctantly. This means that there are things that we can do. But it also means that there are things that we can't do.

–I'm not sure what you're saying. That I need to toughen up and be ruthless? Is that what I need to do if I want to achieve my goal?

–Exactly. You need to accept, to embrace, your own ruthlessness. Just as Bell Wing was comfortable in admitting her own ruthless cunning streak. If you can't do this, you might just be better off accepting that you're an offender against Commonwealth laws…

"Oi, Oeufcoque. I wasn't trying to make her feel *that* responsible…" said the Doctor.

–At her age, seven generations of my species would have come and gone. She's plenty old enough to handle the responsibility, said Oeufcoque.

"Come on, you know that of all mammals, humans take the longest to mature to adulthood. It's not as if she was born a fully formed adult like you were. Give her a break…"

–But I think that this is the game Shell is playing.

Balot interrupted their argument.

–So I think it's just a question of whether I'm prepared to play along. It's the only game left in town. I don't think I* could *give it up now, even if that would somehow make everyone happy.

The moment she finished speaking, Balot felt incredibly small. Ineffectual, weak, and self-conscious, that was all she was.

So what? A beating from the depth of her heart. The ability that she had now was only a fraction of her true potential. What she had now was just a crutch, something to help her propel herself toward her ultimate goal by hook or by crook. Calm descended on her as she realized this. It was as if she had just had her eyes opened to something that should have been glaringly obvious all along.

–At the very least I'd like to use up all the chips I have at the moment and see how far this takes us.

She spoke without bravado, but with plain confidence.

"Bravo," said the Doctor. His eyes were looking at Balot's hands. At Oeufcoque, who was contained inside them.

"That's pretty impressive, in our line of work. Isn't it, Oeufcoque? Balot's coming up with her own sense of values and pushing them to the limit."

Then words that Balot didn't really understand. "You should really try and be a little more honest with yourself, Balot. You'll find it easier in the long run."

–*She's doing her best already*, said Oeufcoque. He seemed a little disgruntled.

"Well, from here on out it's nonstop," said the Doctor. "We have to win, no matter what. No turning back."

Balot nodded. She felt as if her heart were about to burst with gratitude toward the pair.

She prayed that it would always be this way. That would be a *real* victory.

03

The moment the man appeared, the manager of the motel instinctively knew that resistance would be futile.

There were security guards in the motel, of course, and the high-caliber shotgun under the counter was fully loaded.

The manager knew that none of these precautions would be remotely effective, and that in any case the man had the law on his side.

"Dimsdale-Boiled—I'm a PI and Trustee on a case."

The manager had surrendered completely even before he was shown the official ID. Boiled exuded *pressure* from every pore in his skin, and his mere presence was too much for the manager to take.

"I've already checked with the relevant taxi company. These people have been here, right?" As he spoke, Boiled placed photos of a man and a girl on the counter with his massive hands.

The manager definitely remembered them and had no intention of keeping this information back, no sir. The only problem was that he didn't have any idea when they had left their rooms. He had no idea that the pair—who had just come from the airport in a gas-powered taxi, after all—would have changed their appearances so quickly and headed out in a limousine. He though they would still be in their rooms. After all, they both had the do not disturb sign displayed clearly on their doors, didn't they?

"Show me their rooms," said Boiled.

The manager swore with all his heart that he'd take full responsibility to find out which rooms they were in and then to open the doors *personally*.

The first room that Boiled went into was the one that the Doctor had reserved. There was no sign of life. The manager waited in the hall, twitching.

Boiled went over to the trunk that had been left open and started examining the contents as if he had every right to do so.

He looked through the maps and bus tickets that the Doctor had undoubtedly prepared.

The map had a number of red crosses marked on it—destinations, evidently.

There were crosses on Shell's apartment and the hotel that he ran.

Boiled exhibited no sign of emotion as he threw the map to one side.

Then he went to the room that Balot was supposed to be in. No one was there either.

She had hardly any luggage, only a few outfits that had been cast to one side, forsaken. She had a map similar to the one in the Doctor's room, and it too was covered in crosses. Boiled took one glance at it.

Suddenly his cell phone rang. He answered and was met by Shell's voice.

–I've just seen the email you sent me last night. Not what I wanted to hear. And what the hell do you mean by "They escaped to an altitude of 15,000 feet"?

"A Floating Residence, military issue. It's made of a fine, light alloy, and it's under the jurisdiction and protection of the Commonwealth," explained Boiled calmly. "I figured there was a high probability that they would be back on the ground by now, so I've been searching for them. They came to a motel via the Broilerhouse. I'm at that motel right now."

–And? They're not there at this moment, I assume? Won't they be coming back?

"They're certainly not here now. They've left some clothing and maps."

–Maps…?

"Maps with markings on them. Your apartment, the hotel where the woman involved in your transaction is staying, that sort of thing."

–What?

Shell seemed about to erupt, to rush after them in hot pursuit, but Boiled stopped him.

"A childish bluff. If they'd really intended to target your residences they wouldn't have left their maps lying around."

–This is a nightmare, Boiled. I'm not talking metaphorically. An actual, factual nightmare. I see her in my dreams, day in, day out. I'm being assaulted by a girl I can't even remember! She's destroying me!

"It won't be long before I work out what they're up to."

Shell laughed when he heard Boiled's words, spoken in an unchanging monotone. A laugh of relief.

–You know that I was planning on showing my father-in-lawto-be a good time at the casino later today, right?

"Yes."

–Well, I can't show him the slightest sign that I'm worried about either the girl that should be dead or her PIs. Nothing gets past my father-in-law—he's a shrewd customer. So I'm completely defenseless at the moment. If our enemies try something in front of us, we're not even allowed to react, because we have to show the world that we're completely unconcerned by this case. That's right, isn't it?

"Sure…" Then Boiled spotted something from the corner of his eye.

A small square card. Boiled leaned down to pick it up from the side of the bed, cell phone still to his ear.

–I'm leaving it all to you. Do whatever you have to do to crush the girl and the PIs.

"I understand. But in order to do my job properly I need to work out what their aims are. In order to make sure that I cover this from every angle, will you tell me what this key to your deal is —"

–Stop it, Boiled. Don't you understand that I can't tell you that? Not you, not anyone. The whole point is that I'm the only one who knows. *If I tell you, that's gone; the company has all sorts of ways of finding it out, and I lose my edge.*

"You know I have a duty of confidentiality to—"

–Listen to me carefully, Boiled: fuck right off. *Your "duty of confidentiality," as you put it, isn't worth shit to me. This is* my *deal. The reason I'm going to be able to pull it off is because I'm doing it alone. Can* you *manipulate the contents of your own mind? Can* you *break your memories into pieces and use them as bargaining chips?*

Boiled said nothing. He was looking over the object he had just picked up.

It was actually a rectangular piece of card. On the back there was a detailed grid. On the front, a table of rows and columns of numbers.

–Anyhow. You do what you need to do, and you do it now. Got that?

"Understood."

The call ended.

Boiled placed the cell phone back in his jacket pocket. Having lost interest in the room he headed back out into the corridor.

The manager seemed visibly relieved to see that Boiled had finished, but then, "What's this?" Boiled asked. Surprised, the manager took it from his hands.

"Erm… I'm not entirely…" he leaned his head to one side and caught a glimpse of Boiled's cold, piercing gaze. "We could always, uh, ask some of our other staff."

The manager returned to the front desk on the verge of a panic attack. Boiled used the time to call a number of limo companies, collating data on all the cars that had recently been sent to the motel.

"We've, uh, worked out what it is, we think. It's a crib sheet. One of the other employees here is quite keen, you see…"

Boiled plucked the card from the manager's fingers. "Crib sheet?"

"Yes, it has the odds of various hands for different card games, apparently. I couldn't tell you in any detail…"

"Odds…card games…" Boiled muttered. Then, decisively, "You've done well." He thanked the manager—if it could be called thanks—and headed straight out of the motel and into his car.

"Games…" His voice was heavy. He took another glance at the card before placing it in his pocket.

He drove off, turning the steering wheel sharply. There was a flicker of anticipation in Boiled's otherwise blank gray eyes, and the car headed uptown into Mardock City.

≡

As the car sped down the freeway, Boiled thought about the conversation that he had had with Faceman in Paradise. About violence, curiosity, and the value of life—it echoed all around before dissipating.

When had he lost his consideration for life? It must have been just after he joined the army.

Or was it when he was recognized as one of the best soldiers in his class and assigned to the fighter planes?

Either way, there was no doubt that one of the defining points in his life was shortly after the formation of the Airborne Division—the air raid designed to inflict a decisive killer blow on the Continent. Instead, Boiled made a mistake that ended up blowing his own life wide open.

He tried to remember what that moment had been like. How he had felt at that instant.

The moment he realized that he had just dropped half a ton of high-explosive incendiary bombs on troops on his own side.

Friendly fire, it had been called. The people that he had called his comrades, his friends—vaporized in an instant. Boiled was shielded from the media frenzy that ensued—he wasn't named personally, the army made sure of that. But even the army couldn't keep a lid on the disclosure of endemic drug addiction among the ranks of the elite fighter pilots. The press had a field day.

Not that it had been anything other than an open secret in the first place. In particular, it was common knowledge among the top brass. It was even seen as part of a fifty-year-long tradition, if not a particularly proud one. Stimulants were all but officially prescribed.

Indeed, it was one of these "officially prescribed" stimulants that Boiled was dosed up on the day of that fateful friendly fire.

Dextroamphetamine—amphetamines, or possibly dexedrine.

They stimulated your central nervous system, dispelled fatigue, and focused your mind and improved your reflexes. They were legitimate drugs with legitimate medicinal uses.

But the media didn't refer to these drugs by their scientific names. They used more prosaic terms. *Speed. Uppers. Pep pills.*

These were prescribed as a matter of course to tired and nervous pilots on night raids. It was the obvious thing to do. It would practically have been wrong *not* to.

They accelerated your brain function, revved up your metabolism, made all your aches and pains fade away.

Time for R&R…

And made Boiled kill his comrades.

I'm due twelve hours of rest—no, make it six. As long as I can have…

Back then, Boiled had complained of fatigue to his commander. He was only asking for his due—adequate rest time in between strenuous missions. His commander's response was that he should ask the army doctor for medicine that made him *want to* do his duty. Boiled did so. Then he went back in the sky and dropped the 500-kilogram payload on his target, with deadly accuracy, from a height of ten thousand feet. Thinking that the flashing light that signified "friend" meant "foe."

Eight dead, fourteen wounded. The survivors were so horrifically maimed that they would never be able to find a job back in civilian society, let alone continue in the army. It was literally friendly fire: men he had ate with, fought with, slept alongside. Some of them were the ones who had celebrated with Boiled when he won his coveted place in the elite Airborne Division. They'd shared his joy, selflessly, without a trace of envy or jealousy. And when Boiled had the opportunity—the duty—to clear a path for his friends and comrades, to make their job easier by taking out the enemy they were advancing toward, he did exactly the opposite.

After the incident, Boiled was moved to the place where all soldiers with the "distinguished but dangerous" mark on their files were sent and had his options laid out in front of him.

It was a Hobson's choice: transfer to the Experimental Strategic Space Corps, P7 for short, designed to pioneer high-altitude combat at ten thousand feet and above. Ridiculous by name, ridiculous by nature. Or be discharged.

At first Boiled had been prepared to accept a discharge. But then he thought of the life that would be waiting outside the army: no proper job, nothing but days of loneliness and endless guilt.

Furthermore, the side effects of the amphetamines were tearing up Boiled's body at an alarming rate.

Boiled knew all too well what was waiting for him, having seen it in all too many of his comrades.

The terrible withdrawal symptoms that addicts would suffer if they deviated even slightly from the most careful weaning-off program.

Bouts of abnormal violence. Delusional paranoia. Insomnia. Hallucinations. At the end of it all, a pointless death.

So Boiled signed the papers that said he was volunteering for his new assignment and was bundled off to Paradise. In order to wipe the slate clean and return to being a good, upright,

normal soldier again.

As it turned out, Boiled *did* manage to rid himself of his amphetamine addiction while he was there…

Driving along in the car, Boiled tried to remember what it was like.

The last time he slept. The last time he prayed for the souls of his fallen comrades. The last time he thought that life had any value—

As he tried to remember, he felt a phantom tingling in his right hand as it gripped the steering wheel.

Now, this thing is still in the experimental stages, it's a prototype…

And he was reminded of the first time he had held *it* in his hand.

He had been introduced to it shortly after he first arrived in Paradise. He'd been passing, by chance. Before long, he treated it as if it were the only thing he cared about in the whole world. His only friend.

It was so warm.

It was in the palm of his hand, soft, trembling, and yet so comforting and warm.

I'm…so…cold…

That was how it spoke, the golden mouse—with great difficulty, in broken words.

Boiled was surprised, and he quickly clasped both his hands over the mouse to try and keep him warm. He tried to be as gentle as he could.

Boiled could feel the mouse pressing his tiny body up against the wall created by his palms.

The warmth from Boiled's hands seemed to melt into the faint glow of the body heat from the mouse.

Boiled had never felt anything like this before—and he thought he never would again.

Nice…and…warm…

Eventually the mouse's face emerged from the gap between Boiled's fingers. The mouse stared closely at him.

Tha…nk…you…

He sounded just like a talking animal on a children's television show. And, for a moment, Boiled felt like a child again. A warm glow filled him, driving away for a moment the terrible, terrible memories of war and slaughter and guilt and shame.

Who…who? Who…you?

The mouse spoke with a clear, high-pitched tone—it was incredible to think how young he'd sounded back then.

Dimsdale-Boiled, Boiled had answered. The name he had been given by his proud parents, his typical affluent war-generation family who had been only too delighted to see him grow up to be a fine soldier.

When Boiled's parents left this world, his commanders in the army had filled the gap they left behind. Amid the close-knit, spartan conditions of training, the commanders became the natural receptacles for both love and hate for the recruits, just as in a real family. Boiled had vaguely imagined that one day he too would end up becoming one of those commanders.

That was before he lost everything and was disposed of as a soldier to be thrown to the wolves in Paradise.

And it was there in Paradise that Boiled stood, numbly holding the little creature in his hands.

The faint glow of warmth in his hands at that moment was more precious than anything Boiled

had ever experienced before. The vulnerable little creature, so feeble that Boiled could have crushed him with the slightest squeeze, pierced Boiled's heart more vividly than anything he had witnessed in battle.

Boiled had been assigned to Paradise to right a wrong, to redeem himself. Those were his orders, and it was what he wanted. But what was it that Boiled had *really* lost during his years at war? The creature that he cradled in his giant hands held the answer to this question.

Why…does…it…hurt…you?

That was what the mouse had asked, in his high, childish voice. Boiled didn't understand what he was saying at first.

Are…you…hurt?

Finally, Boiled understood that he was being asked if he was in pain.

He also understood why the mouse was asking him.

"No… I'm not hurt," said Boiled, but inside he was deeply moved.

The mouse seemed to understand why people cried.

Boiled was crying. He cried as he felt the warm bundle of life in the palms of his hands, and he cried as he apologized in the depths of his heart to the friends and comrades that he had killed. He cried as he desperately sought forgiveness, as he discovered the one fragment of redemption in the dark abyss where his soul had been plunged.

That was the moment he vowed to himself that he would overcome his addiction.

He was going to wipe the slate clean. Wipe his life clean. This would be his new purpose.

Boiled handled his duties at Paradise with aplomb.

Or to put it another way, Boiled survived what Paradise subjected him to. Many of the other experimental candidates ended up crippled, permanently disfigured, but Boiled endured what Paradise threw at him—and made it his own.

He did so because of the existence of Oeufcoque. While Boiled was in Paradise, Oeufcoque developed at an astonishing rate, and before long he was able to converse with Boiled as an equal.

Years passed, and Boiled survived. All traces of the aftereffects of the drugs had been purged from his body—along with a number of other things.

Of the things that he had lost, some were plain for all to see. Others, only he knew about.

One of them was *repose*: the sleep that he had so desperately needed as a soldier, only to be denied it. Ironically, Boiled's body no longer required it.

His brain and metabolic system had been altered so that he could survive on meager rations and no sleep. A new breed of soldier was born, and Boiled was hailed as the first of a wonderful new species.

But though the operation was repeated successfully on monkeys and some reptiles, it just wouldn't seem to *take* on any other humans. Indeed it left many of them forever disabled.

Then the monkeys and reptiles all started showing a similar set of tendencies.

The monkeys that had been subjects started wringing the necks of control-group monkeys. They didn't particularly seem to hate their targets. They just wanted *lebensraum*, and the control monkeys happened to get in their way.

The killer monkeys seemed to be able to work out that the best time to attack was while the others were asleep.

As far as monkeys went, this was abnormally aggressive, deviant behavior.

The asomniatic monkeys didn't even bother to try threatening the other monkeys, to intimidate them into giving them more space, like a normal monkey would do to increase his territory.

The killer monkeys just *got rid* of the sleepers, as if they were brushing aside so much rubbish.

Quite how this sort of behavior was linked to sleeplessness was never explained, despite the scientists' best efforts.

A number of monkeys had successfully undergone the operation, and they all seemed outwardly normal. Except that they showed no inclination to form any sort of pack. It was as if they deliberately wanted to cut themselves off from the world, to survive as islands unto themselves.

Just as the subject monkeys stopped feeling pain or sorrow, Boiled's heart too was gradually filled by a vast, vague *nothingness*. There was no visible change on the outside, though, and he seemed the picture of health.

The experimental subjects—the monkeys and Boiled—were always in good spirits and, illnesses excepted, in great health.

Body and mind unchangingly healthy. Thus there were none of the natural fluctuations in emotional states—no ups, no downs—and gradually emotion, feelings, withered away, unused.

Nice…and…warm…

"Oeufcoque…"

Boiled let go of the steering wheel with his right hand and stared at his palm.

The memory of the golden mouse that was once in his palm came flowing back to him—the only part that he could no longer remember was the feeling of warmth that he had felt when Oeufcoque was in his hands.

The warmth that he had definitely felt when the mouse was first in his hand—the warmth that had welled up from inside his chest and spread out across his entire body—he felt nothing of this now; he was just an empty husk, a discarded carapace of an insect.

Being so near and yet so far—remembering the contours, but none of the substance—only served to emphasize more keenly just what Boiled had lost.

"I don't need a reason to hold you…" Boiled murmured to himself, then put his right hand back on the steering wheel. "I need you back in these hands."

He needed to wipe the slate clean. To wipe out his failures—to drive out the flashbacks, once and for all. To annihilate his past so that he could start anew, painting a new life on a blank canvas.

"And if I can't have you back, then all there is left to do is to destroy you…as something I never needed in the first place."

Boiled's car accelerated and sped into the night.

The flicker of anticipation that he'd felt earlier was crystallizing into something more definite. He knew where his quarry was now. He was sure of it.

He felt like he had left something behind and needed to hurry in order to retrieve it before it was too late.

A word floated into his mind—*curiosity.* The word that Faceman had used back in Paradise.

Suddenly, Boiled was overflowing with curiosity. It replaced the emptiness that usually passed for emotions inside him.

Boiled raced uptown, like a shark swimming full speed ahead on the trail of blood. Toward Shell's casino.

04

"One of the key factors that will influence our odds of winning is whether we understand clearly the difference between tactics and strategy," the Doctor pontificated.

He was walking straight toward a certain part of the casino. As if he knew exactly where he was heading at a single glance and this was something he did on a daily basis.

"Tactics are the individual choices made in response to the situation in hand, as it develops," the Doctor continued, index finger held aloft. "The first such choice is to stay. The choice not to draw any more cards."

Then he raised his middle finger. "The next choice is to hit. This means choosing to add another card to your hand." He waited until he saw Balot nod, then continued. "The third choice is to double down. With this choice you make your next card your last, and double your bet."

Balot nodded again. She'd already had the rules beaten into her in plenty of detail. They were simple enough. But that very simplicity meant that the game demanded complex calculations from a player if they wanted to master its subtleties.

The Doctor raised his pinky. "Fourth, split. When you have two cards of the same number, you can divide them into two different hands, so you have two bets riding. To do this, you need to double your original stake."

–That's fine. I've got it.

"Ah, there's one more." The Doctor spread his thumb out to join the rest of his fingers. "Surrender. Not all casinos accept it, but it's part of the house rules here. You pay half your original stake, pull out from your hand, and get the other half of your stake back."

–What about re-splitting?

"Unrestricted. You can split as often as you get the cards to do so."

–Doubling down after a split?

"Permitted according to the official rules here. Well, it certainly looks like you've got it all covered."

Balot scowled, but there was a cheeky smile hiding underneath.

–It's not exactly hard, you know. I'm not an idiot!

"All I'm saying is a good grounding in basic tactics is a necessary foundation for strategic planning. Now, what's the most important factor in choosing one of the five tactics?"

–The ten factor.

Balot answered as if she were solving a child's riddle.

–The ten is the greatest card of all.

"Exactly—the opposite of baccarat. Now, the second factor is—"

–Whether we have a pat hand or a stiff hand. Good or bad.

Indeed, the Doctor nodded, the teacher satisfying himself that his charge had absorbed all the relevant information. "Furthermore, the presence or absence of which particular card has an influence on our tactics?"

–The ace. If you have one it's a soft hand, without it's a hard hand.

"And what's the rule that we use to decide who has the advantage over the other between the player and the dealer?"

–If the dealer has a seven up, don't stand pat.

The Doctor nodded, evidently satisfied. With his hand to his chin and his stooped shoulders, shuffling along the corridor, he looked just like a scholar lost in thought.

Or so it seemed, but then he checked his appearance and immediately transformed his demeanor into that of a player. He thrust his hands casually into his pockets and with a joyous expression walked toward the VIP room with Balot.

"As for our strategy, well, we keep it simple for now. Play tactically, and always keep our ultimate goal in mind. As long as we get our timing and our teamwork right—screw it to the sticking post—we'll not fail. From now on, we're in it to win it, not to enjoy ourselves."

The Doctor was still putting on his happy punter act for everyone they passed, but Balot could see that his eyes were serious.

Balot tried to look as humble as possible to show she understood the gravity of the situation. Not that she needed to, for the Doctor continued, "Although I suppose it's all right to enjoy ourselves a bit. It's not every day we get a chance like this, after all."

They had arrived at the entrance to the VIP room.

"O brave new world, that has such people in it!" said the Doctor, after they had taken a single step inside. Balot realized instantly from the air in the room that they were, indeed, in a whole new world.

This was a place designed for people used to luxury.

The dealers in this room were like sculptures carved out of ebony and ivory, and they dealt their cards on brilliant green tables against a backdrop of plush vermilion. In between were floor managers, stolid guardians looking out over all the luxury, and elegant waitresses that made all the others in the casino seem like country bumpkins.

This wasn't excess designed to impress or dazzle. It was luxury designed to make those accustomed to the lap of luxury feel at home—to make the big spenders feel comfortable, to give them the sort of environment they were used to. *You're one of us*, the room seemed to say, *sit down and stay awhile*.

As soon as the Doctor stepped into the room he was immediately accosted—ever so politely—by hostesses who had honed in on him. He brushed them away, indicating that he was used to all this and could find his own way around, thank you very much. He wandered straight into the room, as if to say *I fit right in here*.

The other players in the room all made a distinct impression on Balot. There was, for example, an elderly couple who gave off an aura of leisure—this was probably the only real excitement, real *stimuli*, they had in their lives. Then there was the surprisingly young man who had an older lady in tow.

"Pay the line!" and similar cries were heard all around, and whenever a player collected their winnings they did so with a casual sense of entitlement—not for them Balot's furtive glances all around to see if she had *really* won…

Balot followed after the Doctor, and soon they arrived at a table. Excitement was bubbling up. The dealer was praising a player who had two cards in front of him and a triumphant air. The other customers looked on—and that was, indeed, what they were doing: looking but not touching.

The Doctor peered down at the cards on the table. "Normally, whenever a player's cards total twenty-one, the payout is three to two, of course." As he spoke, the man at the table was showered with a pile of chips. "This casino also has a pair of special house rules. When the player makes

twenty-one by drawing three sevens, you get triple your money back. And, best of all, when the ace and ten are both spades, the payout is eleven to one. Now technically, this pushes the odds right into the player's favor; play your cards right—it's not a house edge, but a *player edge*. Theoretically, anyway. No casino would dare offer such incredible odds unless its dealers were the best in the world. The dealers here don't have to rely on the odds—they have *other ways* of parting players from their money."

Balot looked at the table, and indeed there were two spades: the ace and the one-eyed jack—so called because the jack of spades faced sideways on the card.

"Blackjack!" the Doctor called out as if it had been his own hand.

That was also the name of the game—Balot's final challenge.

Also known as twenty-one—the game where you started with two cards and aimed for a total of twenty-one points, competing against the dealer to see who had the higher hand, unless the total was above twenty-one, in which case you bust out of the game. All picture cards were worth ten points, and the ace could be counted as either a one or an eleven, the player's choice. Simple to learn, fiendishly difficult to master.

There were a number of good reasons why the Doctor had chosen this as their final game.

First of all, this was a game where it was possible to win the million-dollar chips. It had to be a game that was played in the VIP room.

Secondly, with games such as poker and baccarat, you were mainly betting against the other players, not the house; the casino just took its cut, and it was hard to win money from it directly. Difficult, therefore, to get your hands on the coveted million-dollar chips that served as an ostentatious advertisement for the casino. A professional gambler might have found these games amenable to his purposes of building up a steady profit, but Balot was here for a different reason. With blackjack you played directly against the house, the other players being essentially irrelevant. It was one-on-one, player versus casino.

Another key point was that the house edge was unusually low in blackjack. House edge—the statistical edge that the casino enjoyed over time—that small but significant gap between the true odds of a winning hand occurring and the actual payout. In the long run, the house would always win.

With roulette, for example, the actual true odds of a particular number coming up was thirty-eight to one. The payout was thirty-five to one, including the original stake. A player might win an individual game, but over time the odds would win out: the casino's edge was 5.2 percent. For every thousand dollars that was bet, the house would rake in fifty-two dollars.

It was a little different with blackjack. If you just played normally, guessing and going with the flow, the house edge would certainly be over 5 percent, as in roulette.

But with a proper strategy, it was possible to reduce the house edge to less than 0.5 percent—a unique feature that only blackjack enjoyed. Blackjack wasn't called a tactician's game for nothing.

"And best of all, there's no house minimum and no maximum. A true no-limit game," said the Doctor, walking casually toward his target table. "Blackjack has always been the best chance a player has to get his hands on the million-dollar chips. In particular, whenever there's a big game on, the chips are used as calling cards, and they flow backward and forward from player to house like balls in a tennis rally. The house always wins in the end, of course. That's how good the dealers are here—they let nothing slip."

The Doctor related this as if he had witnessed it all firsthand. That was how thorough his

preparation had been. The intricacies of calculating the house edge were beyond Balot, but she did feel that she had a decent grasp of fundamental strategy. As long as Oeufcoque was in her hand, she was confident that she could play her part.

The only other thing she had to watch out for was not to get too sucked into her surroundings—she had to remain detached from all the glitz and glamor. It all rested on whether she could keep a cool head and play her hand as they had planned.

Suddenly, the Doctor stooped down to look into Balot's face. "So, what's the culmination of all our strategy and tactics? What is our best move?" It was almost as if he were asking for a password from a soldier returning from battle.

Balot looked straight back into the Doctor's blue eyes.

–Hit and run.

The Doctor smiled when she answered without hesitation.

–The player has the odds stacked against him. In and out quickly is the only way to win against a stronger opponent.

She squeezed both her hands tightly. She felt like Oeufcoque was speaking the words with her.

She felt Oeufcoque wrapped around her clenched fists, ever so soft. The Doctor and Oeufcoque: always on the lookout for her, sensitive to her feelings.

"Now, let's go and win. And as soon as we win, we run away," the Doctor said. He smiled confidently and headed closer toward their objective. The table.

"Here we are—our battleground!" He spoke in a different voice now, loud enough for all others in the surrounding area to hear. The first salvo had been fired.

The table had just taken a pause in between games. The dealer looked up from the cards that he was shuffling and smiled at the Doctor. He had silvery blond hair and green eyes. His every movement was calm and composed, and he continued shuffling uninterrupted even though his eyes no longer looked at his hand.

The Doctor placed his hand on the back of one of the seats—the middle one of seven—and called out to the other punters, "May I?"

"Oh, rather! We were just itching for a *soupçon* of variety, dear," answered a well-built lady. Her fat fingers sported a number of chunky rings, all digging into her flesh. Her face was just as chubby, as was her neck, which sported strands of gold and silver jewelry. Her generously proportioned rump spread out to about four times the size of Balot's seat. Her round eyes blinked behind her silver-green spectacles. She beckoned to the Doctor to sit, as did the dealer.

But the Doctor stood there for the moment, hand still on the back of the chair. "We wouldn't want to interrupt the flow of the cards, you see." He spoke like a complete beginner and sought approval from the other players.

"Oh, it's all the same to us, and we wouldn't want to get in your way," continued the lady with a laugh. Then she nudged the old man next to her. From her actions it was clear they were together. The old man nodded to the Doctor to welcome him too. He was a skinny little thing—a sprig of parsley next to the fat sausage of the woman.

The next man along took his eyes off the cards for a moment and looked at Balot and the Doctor in order to welcome them. This man sported a mane of lush black hair and wore a fashionable monocle over one eye. He seemed to be considering how the addition of the Doctor and Balot would affect the cards.

The three players already at the table all sat to the right of the chair that the Doctor had just

chosen. The monocled man's seat was the furthest to the right of the semicircular table, and this seat was known as "first base"—it was the first seat to be dealt the cards. By the way he sat on the edge of his seat, waiting for his cards to come, it was safe to say he was a complete addict living in a world of his own.

In their training, the Doctor had explained that you could tell a lot about a blackjack player's personality from which seat they chose. Now that Balot had seen it in the flesh, it seemed the most obvious thing in the world.

The Doctor responded to their pleasantries in kind and took a seat, and Balot did the same.

"What a delightful young woman," said the lady. Her face was friendly but she couldn't hide her curiosity.

Balot dipped her head, and the Doctor answered for her. "Yes, my beautiful young niece has been entrusted to her uncle today for safekeeping."

"And you're entertaining her with cards?"

"Yes. Her father and I are in agreement that young people should be exposed to this sort of thing at an early age. Her mother was unsure, but I convinced her by explaining that a person who knows how to play cards knows the meaning of the word 'perseverance.' "

The Doctor gave a knowing smile.

"Perseverance," the woman repeated, and her smile grew even more friendly. It was as if she had wanted someone to say that word aloud. "I couldn't agree more!"

Her large frame wobbled, and she prodded the shoulder of the old man next to her. He shrugged his shoulders and joined in. "And composure," he added, waggling his finger.

The monocled man next to him joined in too. "And wisdom and bravery," he said with a broad grin.

Balot was growing a little weary of all this grandstanding. The Doctor was a born con man, surely, able to swindle his way into any place. He could manipulate the mood of a gathering just like that. Or perhaps this was what the Doctor was really like back in the day when he was a decorated researcher. He continued to ingratiate himself into the present gathering, preparing the way for Balot's debut in society, taking on the role of entertainer while the shuffle was under way.

The shuffle was done thoroughly, so it took a surprisingly long time. Plenty of people took advantage of this lull in the action to cool off, maybe take a step back from the action, and new players would take their places. Or they would take a drink, or engage in friendly banter with the other players, or engage the dealer in conversation about their legendary exploits or the hand that got away. Rumors, scurrilous stories, tales of bankruptcy and ruin were all the currency in such situations.

With the demeanor of one who was used to utilizing the shuffle break effectively, the Doctor turned to the dealer. "Looks like we're welcome here," he said. "Deal us in, Marlowe."

The dealer's eyes snapped up to the Doctor. His all-seeing eyes were now focused on one point, as if he were trying to work something out.

"Have we met before, sir?" the dealer asked him, friendly, apologetic that he seemed to have forgotten. But behind the mask there was a trace of wariness. There were plenty of professional gamblers who worked out the individual habits of dealers and tried to exploit them.

The Doctor showed no sign of picking up on this, though. Instead, he said the dealer's full name out loud, as if he was reminding himself, "Marlowe John Fever."

The dealer nodded. The other punters looked at him, almost as if it had only just occurred to

them for the first time that the dealer might have a name.

"No, I don't believe we've met face-to-face before, Marlowe. But your reputation precedes you, sir! You come highly recommended by this girl's father, who happens to be a poker buddy of mine."

The Doctor named an obscure gene therapy patent company, indicating that he was a director there, and continued. "Your table is supposed to be the safest place to play a peaceful and enjoyable game. I wanted to see for myself. The conversation flows easily around you, they say, and your sharp eyes don't permit any sort of card counting."

At this point the monocled man ran his hands through his hair. *Hmm*—he seemed impressed. He had perked up at the mention of the phrase "card counting."

But the Doctor had no more to say on this front. Instead: "I've taken my beloved niece under my wing for the day. I want her to experience a nice, clean game. And look, as I thought, isn't he nice and handsome? Quite a dish, eh?" He turned to Balot for the last bit, but he was obviously teasing the dealer just as much for the benefit of the other players.

It would take more than that to ruffle the feathers of the dealer known as Marlowe, though. "Well, if there's any part of the game that you're unsure about then feel free to ask away, miss," he told Balot coolly.

–Thank you. I will.

When Balot replied, the others at the table turned to look at her in surprise. Everyone except the dealer, who asked her, calmly as ever, "Your throat?"

"Yes, a car accident. Don't worry, though, she can speak loud and clear using that thing. You won't have any trouble understanding her," said the Doctor.

The dealer nodded, and then, for the first time, stopped shuffling the cards.

"Do you know the hand signals for this game?"

In lieu of an answer, Balot lifted her left hand.

–Stay.

Palm down, hand waved from side to side.

–Hit.

She tapped the table with her index finger.

–Split.

Both index fingers, pulled apart from each other.

–Double down.

She mimed placing a chip on the designated cross on the green cloth that covered the table.

The dealer smiled kindly. It was a smile to reassure the other players. If it came down to it, she could play even if her voice didn't work. She was glad that he didn't make a big deal of her disability. It was only natural as far as the casino was concerned, of course; they wanted to make their customers feel as comfortable as possible. For a moment, though, Balot felt that maybe this man was as wonderful as the Doctor had made out.

As the dealer calmly went back to shuffling the cards, Balot suddenly felt some words from Oeufcoque appear in her left hand.

–Ask about card counting. Before the dealer finishes shuffling.

Balot was brought back down to earth with a jolt, taking her eyes off the dealer. She couldn't afford to develop feelings for the man that was, for all practical purposes, her opponent—she had

let down her guard, and it wouldn't do. Gathering her wits about her, she tugged on the Doctor's sleeve in a manner that she hoped came across as endearing.

–Um… Uncle?

She had—finally—gotten used to calling him that.

–What* is *"card counting"?

She asked the question in the most casual tone she could muster. The Doctor looked surprised, or rather the Doctor *looked* surprised.

"How on earth did a refined young lady such as you hear about such a thing?"

–You just mentioned it, Uncle.

The Doctor looked up to the ceiling as if he had just realized his grave error. "Hum…look, just don't tell your father that you heard about such a thing from me, will you?"

–Okay. So what sort of rule is it?

"It's not a rule, exactly." The Doctor seemed to be searching for the right words. "Card counting is, well, it's counting the cards. Remembering what's come before. If you know what's already gone, you have a better chance at guessing what comes next, right?"

–Wow! Sounds exciting! Will you show me how it's done?

"Uh…erm…" the Doctor swallowed his tongue. The lady next to him burst into a giggling fit. The old man and the monocled man were both grinning at the scene unfolding in front of them. They knew all about card counting. How it wasn't so much considered a tactic as it was a serious threat to the casino. "It's only grubby little card sharps who try and use card counting to rip off the casino. Gambling is a game of luck and courage. It's only cowards who don't trust their luck who try such a thing. It's not appropriate for a young lady like you."

The Doctor was passionate in his lecture.

–Hmm.

Balot looked disappointed—bored, even. The doctor raised a finger and waggled it from side to side. "Casinos exist to be battled fair and square. Gambling is enjoyable precisely because you don't know whether you are going to win or lose." He pressed his point home.

Fair and square. Not remotely true, of course. The odds on most games were stacked firmly in the house's favor. Still, Balot nodded, as if to say that she thought she understood.

–I still don't understand why were you talking about card counting as if it was such a bad thing, though.

"Professional gamblers spoil all the *fun* for us proper players. The game is there to be enjoyed. In any case, how are you supposed to memorize all the cards in six decks of cards? It's impossible for one person to do it—you'd need a whole gang of you on the case.

–But I thought you were good with numbers, Uncle?

"Sure, as long as I have a calculator at hand."

The others around the table all laughed at this. This was better than a sitcom. Fun for all the family—and, indeed, it was starting to feel like a family gathering.

Thus it was that Balot and the Doctor accomplished their first task: to draw the others into their world, make them laugh, make them relax, lower their guards. Not to win big, not to steal all the money from the other players. But to win *steadily.* This was what casinos feared the most. Players who won and won, bit by bit, undermining their whole operation. Earthquakes had caused less damage to casinos.

This was the table, and the dealer, that the Doctor and Balot had been aiming for all along. None of their conversation had been wasted.

Before long the dealer finished the shuffle, and the comedy show drew to a natural close.

"Please place this marker wherever you like in the pack of cards," said the dealer, handing a transparent red card to Balot. It was the last step in the shuffle. He had chosen Balot for the task as he knew this would meet with the approval of the whole table. Balot did as she was asked and placed the marker somewhere in the middle of the pile.

The dealer cut the cards again, so that the red marker was now in the final thirty or so of the 312 cards. When during the course of play the cards reached the red marker it would be game over and time to reshuffle. This was a measure taken by the casino to give the appearance of fairness—after all, it was one of the players who got to decide where the marker was placed. More importantly, though, it protected the casino from card counting—even if a player had somehow managed to memorize all the cards, they wouldn't have the opportunity to use this to their advantage at the tail end of the deck.

There were 312 cards in all. They were all placed in the card shoe, and the lid placed on top.

The dealer placed his hand on the first card and looked around at the players.

All conversation had stopped. The only sound to break the silence was the clatter of chips as they were placed on the table. The atmosphere was at once both calm and fevered. Balot gripped her chips tightly in her hands and then, when she was ready, placed them down on the table in front of her. They made a satisfying click as they landed.

The game was about to begin.

Book III:

THE THIRD EXHAUST

Chapter 9

CRANK SHAFT

01

To survive—that was what Balot thought in response to the cards that were dealt to her.

She had no intention of being killed a second time without putting up some resistance. Instead she was here so that she could grasp her enemy's heart in her hand, and in order to do that she had to stay in the game at all costs. She had to survive the game that the man called Shell had drawn her into. She had to make the game her own and solve her case.

Blackjack—that was the name of this, the last game in the casino.

The dealer dealt the cards, starting from the right. The first card Balot was dealt was the queen of clubs. Worth ten points, a good card, a useful card. The suit was irrelevant in this game.

–Wow, clubs really are your suit. They helped you win at poker too, didn't they? Oeufcoque's words floated up inside the glove covering her left hand.

–Is this a good omen, do you think?

–Well, it's not a bad one.

Oeufcoque said this to calm Balot down, to make her feel better. Balot clung to these words, clasping her hands together as if in prayer, and watched as the dealer's upcard was revealed. Unfortunately, it was the ace of clubs.

***–How's that* not bad?**

She couldn't stop herself. Inside her gloves, though, Oeufcoque just shrugged, she thought.

Then Balot's second card was dealt to her. Another club. But a 6 this time. Her total was now sixteen.

Her eyes flew involuntarily to the dealer's second card. The card that faced down, next to the ace.

She heard the voice of the monocled man who sat at the far right of the table, bold and resolute, calling for another card—*hit*.

Balot was about to look toward him, but Oeufcoque quickly stopped her.

–You don't need to worry about other people's cards just yet.

Balot looked down at her cards. The problem wasn't the cards but Balot herself. Suddenly her heart started racing. *What if she got it wrong?* For the first time since she had entered the casino, Balot felt nervous. She tried to remember what sort of number sixteen was, but found that she couldn't. What had the Doctor said to her again? Was it a good number or a bad number?

She heard the monocled man calling *stay*. The old man stayed too.

The woman hit—then paused a moment before staying.

"Hit." The Doctor's voice, right next to her. Her heart skipped a beat. It took every ounce of her self-control not to look at the Doctor's cards. Her heart pounded hard, and she was in turmoil. A veritable earthquake.

"Stay," said the Doctor. He was going to weather this one out.

Balot raised her head. Her eyes met the dealer's. She was sucked in completely.

–Hit.

The dealer dealt her third card in a well-rehearsed move, turning the card over in front of her with machinelike precision. Jack of spades. She felt like she had been stabbed by the spade itself.

"Bust." The dealer reported the outcome as everything was swept away. Her cards and her

chips, all gone in an instant. And with it, the game, at least for this round. The dealer collected them all and deposited them in their designated places, then turned his hidden card over.

It was a 7. According to the rules, this made a soft eighteen—the ace and the 7. This meant that Balot would have lost regardless of whether she stayed or hit. So hitting might have been the right decision after all.

Or was it?

She heard a humming sound. It was the monocled man. Had Balot not called just then, the one-eyed jack—jack of spades—would have come to him. Tough luck.

In blackjack, where you chose to sit—and whom you chose to sit next to—could end up influencing your game considerably. Someone who drew cards needlessly could spoil things for everyone else and in particular the players right next to you—Balot remembered the Doctor telling her something like this. This factor worked in the dealer's favor.

And yet a moment ago she hadn't been able to remember anything. Balot reproached herself.

The dealer divided up the winners and the losers in much same way you would sort through the contents of your pockets—things you needed, things you didn't. This time it was the Doctor and the old man who had won. Their money doubled.

–Let's move on to the first step of our plan, Oeufcoque said as if the preceding game had never happened.

–What was I supposed to do back there? Did I make the right move?

–The first thing you need to do is be able to work out the answer to that question for yourself.

That hardly answered her question. Balot silently placed her next chips down. She felt bitterly disappointed.

Balot's next card was a 2. She ignored the suit this time. Then a 5—total seven.

The dealer's upcard was a jack. Ten points. And so the game began again, based on the cards in Balot's hand versus the upcard.

–I'm going to display your funds, Oeufcoque's words floated up.

First, Balot's entire bankroll. Next to that, her working capital, divided into ten equal parts. Then, the maximum and the minimum that she could bet per game. Finally, the total amount she had spent so far. That was the money management system devised by Oeufcoque.

The basis of a sound strategy in a casino was neither a head for figures nor an eye for human psychology. It was more fundamental than that; you needed an effective system to keep track of your money.

According to the odds, it was not possible in the long run to turn the house edge around—statistically the numbers were against the player. But that was the long run. In the short run, it was perfectly possible for the player to enjoy a winning streak. The key factor was this: when riding the crest of the wave of a winning streak, keep track of the funds in play and manage the bank to stay in play through the drier patches.

Balot had just put down three hundred dollars in chips. The same amount as in the previous hand. The amount wasn't a true representation of Balot's feelings. It was just a tactical sum, an expeditionary force.

Balot's total bankroll at that precise moment was just over $630,000.

So one tenth of this would be her "mini-bank," enough for one session.

This worked out to be slightly over $63,000. They'd take a break once this was used up one

way or another; that was the idea.

The maximum bet on any particular hand would be one twentieth of the mini-bank, and the minimum bet—i.e. the basic unit—one tenth of that.

In other words, at the moment Balot should start with bets of just over three hundred dollars.

When the maximum bet per hand was one tenth of the mini-bank, there would be a one percent possibility of losing all their capital. If, though, they adjusted their bets according to the flow of play and the fluctuation in their funds, it would be possible to limit the chance of bankruptcy to less than 0.01 percent.

–Well, let's start off by seeing what we can do.

After the numbers had been shown on Balot's right hand, this message came up on her left before disappearing in an instant.

That was the moment Balot realized why she was so nervous.

It was because there was so little that she *could* do. The only thing the players had any influence over in these games was the chips. Partly to preempt the possibility of cheating, players weren't even allowed to touch their own cards.

Not for this game the psychological warfare of poker or the finely tuned sensory perception involved in roulette. All there was to do here was walk the tightrope of uncertainty over and over again.

This was why she felt unusually impatient and susceptible to being swept away by the action.

But the key to successfully traversing that tightrope wasn't just luck. It was a meaningful activity precisely because it was possible to separate out the factors that you *could* influence from the factors that you couldn't. This was the lesson—indeed, the first principle—that Oeufcoque and the Doctor had hammered into her from day one.

This was all reverberating inside her now, in her mind, in her heart.

Before long it was Balot's turn. She looked at her cards again. A 2 and 5, a total of seven.

–Hit.

A no-brainer. There wasn't a single card she could draw at this point that would make her go bust. In fact, for all intents and purposes her next card could be considered her real second card. The card came, and it was an 8—and now her total was fifteen.

The upcard was a jack, ten points. The dealer had to keep on drawing until he reached seventeen or higher, those were the rules. The only way Balot could win with her fifteen was if the dealer bust. Wouldn't it be better for her to draw another card, then? This, rather than any complicated statistical calculation, was Balot's rationale for her next move.

–Hit.

Her heart missed a beat as she proclaimed her next move. In a different way from the previous hand, though; she felt that this was somehow *her choice* this time, rather than a move she made involuntarily while swept up in the flow of the game.

The fourth card was revealed right in front of her eyes in a swift movement. The number was 7. Her total was twenty-two.

"Bust."

Her chips dissipated into the ether, just like with the previous hand.

It stands to reason, seemed the general feeling at the table. Why, after all, should it be easy for a little girl like her to master the deep mysteries of such a game? The dealer and the other players could have told her that.

That was fine with Balot. *It was no more than the truth, after all.* Part of her did really feel this way, and it seemed for a moment that there was a different version of herself sitting in the chair.

The dealer drew his card and it was a 6—his total was now sixteen. As per his obligation under the rules he drew another. A 5. Total twenty-one. There were sighs all around.

Had Balot not drawn her last card, the dealer would have gone bust, and everyone at the table would have won.

Instead, as a result of Balot's actions, everyone lost. Having said that, Balot was no longer bothered. *If you wanted to win, you should have predicted what cards I was going to draw*, she thought, unapologetic.

Everyone's chips were collected, and a new game began. After that Balot lost two more hands, won one, and then seemed to settle into a pattern of winning and losing alternate hands.

When you were destined to lose a hand you lost it, no matter how you bet or what you tried—that was blackjack.

You could lose because you had drawn a card, and you could lose because you hadn't.

You could draw on a twelve and bust, or you could stay on a sixteen and lose because of it. Then there were those hands where you were always going to lose whether you drew another card or not, because the dealer simply had a better hand. This happened not once or twice, but repeatedly.

On the other hand, it could go the other way—you didn't have to do anything and could simply win over and over again. Whatever you did, whatever the other players did. Call it luck if you like, but such luck didn't just come out of nowhere; many battles were fought, and people had struggled with tactics and strategy to work out the optimal course of play through blood, sweat, and tears before finally reaching the depths of the game.

The battle raged on, a microcosm of Balot's inner turmoil.

Win or lose, it was all in vain if she didn't manage to keep a cool head and a steady hand.

–*Concentrate on your breathing.*

Oeufcoque had to remind her constantly of this.

Balot knew for herself that this was the best way for her to stay in control.

Even when she had learned to use a gun, the first thing she mastered was her breathing. The Doctor had drummed it into her that it was what she needed to focus on at all times; when she was first taken to the hideaway, after the trial, whenever she had a headache.

Balot concentrated on the feeling of what it was like when she was at her most relaxed and tried to remember what her breathing felt like then, inhaling, then exhaling. She had always thought that breathing was one of those things that happened of its own accord, varying from hard to gentle depending on the circumstances, but when she actually put her mind to it and focused she was surprised at how much she could control her breath and how much in turn that improved her composure and her mood.

When she breathed deeply into her stomach, she felt *relief*. When she breathed into her chest, she felt *hope*. When she breathed into her shoulders she felt her whole pulse quickening, and when she breathed focusing on her pulse she felt a strong sense of identity, of knowing the ins and outs of her body.

Her aim now was to ensure that she would be able to breathe consistently and calmly, regardless of whether she won or lost at the table.

Turning her mind to this made her realize just how stiff she had become since sitting down.

Curiously, it wasn't even the high stakes that were making her feel tense and uncomfortable.

Six hundred thousand dollars—an unthinkable sum of money in her previous life.

As the Doctor said, it wouldn't be at all strange if she'd wanted to just take the money and run, forgetting all about the case.

But the hatred that she felt burning away inside her was not about to accept the consolation prize of mere money.

The hatred that she felt was in fact for the money itself, and also for those people who were its slave. Virtually everyone she knew who was motivated by money ended up coming to grief one way or another. Not only that, the more grief they came to the further they got sucked in and the more they started believing that money would solve all their problems. The more money you had the more you could do with it, true, but also the more it ended up doing to you.

This was why it was no longer simply a question of money for Balot. She had been hurt by other peoples' pursuit of money, but now it was time to turn the tables and to use that very money that had hurt her as her tool to do it. Balot was fired up, but she wouldn't let this fire disrupt her game. She breathed in deeply, determined to stay in control so that she was ready to make the right decisions no matter what the game threw at her.

She was a long way away from certain victory—indeed, her first mini-bank was slowly but surely being eaten away. At the moment it was a case of one step forward, two steps back. But neither were there any unpleasant surprises—it was all going according to their calculations. It was all there for the taking. All there was to do was hope for the best and plow on, best foot forward.

As they were approaching the thirtieth hand, Balot suddenly realized something.

Something was up with the dealer. She tried to pinpoint exactly *what*.

When her turn came, she thought she would try something to test her observation.

–Hit.

For a moment, the dealer was thrown off-kilter. One of the reasons for this was Balot's cards.

A queen and 9. Nineteen in total. It was hardly the usual thing to draw on this sort of hand.

The dealer flipped the card over. It was a 2. Balot's rather irrational move had worked in her favor, and she felt a disturbance in the breathing patterns of everyone at the table.

Her total was twenty-one—her first since sitting down at the table.

The dealer turned over his hidden card, which was a 10.

Total: twenty. Balot was the only one to win. All eyes were on Balot as the dealer calmly paid out her winnings.

It didn't take long, though, before everyone dismissed it as a fluke and went back about their business.

Balot hadn't expected to win. That fact probably registered on her face.

She was onto something, though—she was sure of it. As she received her winnings, she thought about it.

Mainly about whether it *was* something significant, not *what* the significance was. Not yet, anyway.

–Oeufcoque, there's something I want to ask you.

–What is it?

–I think the dealer is timing his deals. Aiming for the right moment.

–Aiming?

–Yeah, waiting until the instant we finish fully exhaling before he deals.

So far, it was a fragile hypothesis—had Oeufcoque dismissed it out of hand as ludicrous, she wasn't sure she would have been able to defend it.

But Oeufcoque's answer struck an unexpected chord.

–How did you work that out?

As if to say that he was just about to tell her that fact himself. Balot's suspicions were confirmed, and her vague hunch became a firm conviction that she was onto something important.

–I deliberately took a long breath. He waited for me to finish before dealing.

–Well, seeing as you've managed to work that out for yourself, the first stage of our work here is complete. You're on course to secure victory with your own two hands.

Half of her was delighted by the unexpected words of encouragement and praise, but at the same time she was more discouraged than ever—she seemed so near and yet so far.

–That's not true at all. I'm losing steadily and I have no idea how I'm going to turn it around.

–Don't worry. You don't need to start winning yet. All that's important at this stage is that you lose in a meaningful way. You're playing a role in the Doctor's plan. And you will win yet. With me here to back you up.

Now Balot was fired up again. She felt *supported*—as if there were a strong pillar inside her, supple and flexible, there to prop her up, unbreakable.

–Now that this hand is over, there'll be a break.

Hearing Oeufcoque's words, Balot looked at the card shoe. Sure enough, the clear red marker that she had shoved into the pile of cards was now showing, signifying an imminent reshuffle.

–We'll move on to the next stage of our plan after the shuffle.

Balot squeezed both her hands tightly by way of reply.

The game halted. The dealer collected all the cards and started the shuffle in a series of smooth movements.

According to the tally that showed in her right palm, a total of twenty-eight hands had been played so far. Balot had only won seven of these. Three were draws, and she had lost the remaining eighteen hands. She was currently down $3,300.

Conversation between the players broke out again.

Balot watched the shuffle. She felt that she might be able to pick something up—the reason he dealt in tempo with the players' breathing. Whatever the reason, she had a gut feeling that she'd be able to start using her abilities shortly. She wasn't about to surrender her fate to luck.

As she was thinking the Doctor said, "I told you you'd enjoy yourself!" The fat lady next to him was grinning in her direction too.

Balot nodded. A calm, composed gesture. The Doctor smiled broadly and engaged the lady in conversation again. He was saying that even an innocent young thing like Balot couldn't resist the allure of a game like this. In other words, he was covering for Balot's somewhat unnatural manner.

Before long the shuffle was over, and the dealer handed the red marker to the monocled man, who placed it in the pile of cards. The cards were cut, and round two was about to begin.

–Time to move on to stage two of our plan. I'll give you the basic tactics.

Oeufcoque's words appeared in her palm, and at the same time a table containing symbols and numbers started to appear on the other side. Information on how to compare her hand with that of

the dealer.

–I'm going to gradually start feeding you more information.

Balot quickly referenced her card against the chart on her hand.

The rows were her card totals, and the columns the dealer's upcard. Cross-referencing the two showed what move would be tactically optimal under what circumstances.

At the moment, her cards were 9 and 5, a total of fourteen. The dealer's upcard, 5.

The table showed that the appropriate tactic in these circumstances was *S*—the symbol for stay.

Balot would have played it differently, but she would have been wrong. Under these circumstances, the best option was not to battle it out but to sweat it out, however odd that seemed to her.

She did as the chart indicated and gave the signal to stay.

The dealer glanced at Balot as he turned over his hidden card. A queen—bringing his total up to fifteen.

The dealer now had to draw another card—those were the rules, as his total was below seventeen. He drew a jack. Total twenty-five—bust. Balot was genuinely impressed.

–And I could have sworn that I should have hit.

–That would have been a mistake under those circumstances. The most common value of a card in this game is ten. There are four different types—the king, queen, jack, and ten. The cards in our hand have little effect on the dealer's chances of going bust. According to a simple calculation the chance of drawing a ten is 31 percent—four times as likely as any other card.

–The ten factor, Balot answered Oeufcoque unconsciously. She'd had all this explained to her already, but it was different in real life, and she had had to experience it to believe it. Balot straightened herself up and tried to digest the implications of what had just happened.

–So, when the dealer's upcard is a five, he has a 43 percent chance of going bust. That's more than two times out of every five. When that happens and you don't have a strong hand, your best chance of winning is to hold tight and wait for the dealer to self-destruct.

After the payouts were completed, the cards for the next hand were dealt. Jack and 6, total sixteen.

The dealer's upcard was a 7.

The relevant corner of the tactics grid was highlighted. The symbol was *H*—hit.

Another unexpected move. Balot would have felt more comfortable staying. But she knew that this was just because she had yet to fully absorb all the information that she had been taught, to assimilate it and make it her own.

Oeufcoque seemed to sense Balot's self-reproach and jumped in to explain the logic behind this move.

–If we stay on any number between twelve and sixteen when the dealer has an upcard of seven or higher, we stand a 75 percent chance of losing. Conversely, when we have a total of seventeen or over and the dealer has an upcard of between two and six, we're better off staying —the odds are overwhelmingly in our favor.

–Seven up. Seventeen or higher for the player, seven or higher for the dealer.

Again the lessons that Balot had been taught came flooding back.

–Exactly right. Whereas the worst sort of hand for us is a fifteen or sixteen, when we can expect to lose. Here, hitting reduces our chance of losing from 75 percent to 63 percent. Better

to move than not.

Balot obeyed and hit, drawing her third card.

Unfortunately it was a king. Well and truly bust.

The dealer's next card turned out to be a jack, also worth ten. Total seventeen. Whatever Balot had done she would have lost. Better to have gone out fighting and taken the chance to improve the odds, even if she happened to have been unsuccessful this time.

Blackjack was a losers' game. It was simply impossible to win all the time. The key was not to expect to win every hand but to play the odds so that you created conditions that were as favorable as possible.

To win, a player needed great staying power—the force of mind to keep on going down that long and winding road.

The next hand was a case in point. Balot's hand was a 10 and 5—and a fifteen was fully expected to lose.

The dealer's upcard was a queen. Not the time to stay, then. There was the option of surrendering, but now wasn't the right time to start retreating and playing defensively. The bankroll was still nice and thick, and even the first mini-bank was still intact, so it was no time to roll over and play dead.

–Hit.

The dealer glanced at Balot again. He dealt her a 4.

–Stay.

It was Balot's reflexes that spoke now. Her new total was nineteen. The dealer drew his card. An 8.

Balot and the monocled man were the only winners.

For a brief moment, Balot felt that she had accomplished something tangible, however slight. She exhaled, deeply.

–I think the time is ripe for you to start paying some attention to your surroundings.

Oeufcoque said this, attuned as he was to the subtleties of her feelings, in response to Balot's increasing interest in the players all around her. He was now allowing Balot to progress, to do something that he had previously forbidden.

–Thanks. It's just that I really want to know how other people are playing. She started to explain herself, why she was getting so impatient, but Oeufcoque cut her off.

–No need to apologize. It really is most impressive how quick you are at picking up on all this. It's on the early side to do so, but I really think you are ready to move on to the third stage.

No sooner had the words floated up on Balot's hand and registered with her than they disappeared, replaced by a new set of tables. There was now roughly six times as much information displayed as there had been before. Specifically tables showing the collated tactics of everyone at the table up to this point, including the dealer. And the results: how many hands won, how many lost.

The monocled man was in the lead, with the old man and the Doctor not too far behind. The lady and Balot seemed to be losing hands in equal measure.

Also shown was the regularity with which the dealer bust, roughly one in five times.

The statistics that most interested Balot were those relating to the monocled man. He was on a winning streak, and an impressive one at that. He was riding the crest of the wave of victory. The question was whether this was due to the man's skill or his luck.

The cards were dealt. Balot received a jack and 2.

The monocled man, on the other hand, had a 4 and 6—a total of ten.

"Double down," said the man. The dealer's upcard was 4. The man's move was entirely consistent with what was showing on Oeufcoque's table. The man added his chips to the pile and drew a 9. Total nineteen. When you called "double down," you were permitted to draw only one additional card—so this was about as good as it got, as far as the monocled man was concerned.

The game progressed, and Balot stayed on her hand.

The dealer's hidden card was a 7. He drew another card, a 5—total seventeen.

Balot lost, as did all the other players except for the monocled man.

They moved to the next hand. The monocled man she was watching had an 8 and a 6.

"Double down."

For a moment Balot thought that she had heard wrong. But the man was placing another pile of chips on the table.

The dealer's upcard was a 3. According to Oeufcoque's tactical grid, he should be staying rather than drawing. The card that the man drew, however, was a 7.

Twenty-one.

The player's face broke out into a satisfied grin. He'd now be looking at a major payout, as long as the dealer didn't get a blackjack himself.

The monocled man had his wish granted when the dealer bust and lost. All the players—including Balot—were winners that round, but the monocled man won more than the rest of them and was obviously delighted by this fact.

Then in the next hand the man hit on sixteen and won, and the game was brought to a close. During the shuffle the topic of conversation among the players was, rather inevitably, the monocled man's winning streak.

–The man on the far right is pretty amazing.

–Oh, the dealer has his eye on him.

–Because he's winning too much?

–Being allowed to win*, more like.*

Balot didn't immediately get what Oeufcoque meant.

–Doesn't the dealer have his eye on him* because *he's winning too much?

–No, he's swallowed the dealer's bait hook, line, and sinker. He just happens to be winning now, that's all.

Right at that moment Balot noticed something about the man.

–He seems to be in pain?

The monocled man had the roughest breathing patterns of everyone at the table—by far.

–Good spot.

Encouraged by Oeufcoque's words, Balot probed further, trying to get to the heart of the matter.

–Is it related to his breathing patterns?

–It is.

–But the man's winning most of his hands, isn't he?

–There's more to this game than the number of hands you win. This statement struck an odd chord with Balot. Then she realized that she was thinking about an important aspect of the game from all the wrong angles.

–Can you tell me how much money everyone has bet so far? How much they've lost too?

–Roger that.

No sooner had he spoken than the existing tables on Balot's hands were joined by detailed records of wins and losses to date for each player—P&Ls for each individual player at the table, as it were.

The most surprising statistic was the running total of the monocled man; in absolute terms he was considerably in the red. The old man was doing the best, closely followed by the Doctor. Balot had lost fairly heavily at first but was now keeping her losses down to about half the rate she was losing at the start. The monocled man and the lady were both roughly on a par with each other; that is to say, they were both losing considerably more than they were winning.

It was almost as if the more hands the monocled man won, the more he ended up losing overall.

–I never would have guessed that the man was losing so much money!

–Nobody *would have—that's kind of the idea.*

–And is that because of the dealer?

What other explanation could there be? Somehow, the dealer was managing to beguile the man's senses, causing him to lose track of his numbers.

–Well, it's partly because of the way blackjack works, of course, and the man's personality only exacerbates this. But the dealer has a hand in it too—I can smell something deliberate about the way he's stringing the man along.

–Deliberate? In what way?

–In a most ingenious and subtle way…

The shuffle had finished, and now it was the old man's turn to stick the transparent red marker into the stack of cards. The cards were cut, and the monocled man greedily thrust his chips forward. Five hundred dollars' worth. Judging by the size of his bet the man ought to have had a total bankroll of close to a million—but he almost certainly had nothing of the sort.

The first cards were dealt. Balot paid close attention to the timing.

Sure enough, the cards were released the instant the monocled man was out of breath. He took a light gulp as the first card landed.

The man's card was a 9. The cards were then dealt to the other players in turn; Balot had a 7 in front of her.

The dealer's upcard was a 4. The players' second cards were dealt in sharp succession, stabbing like a knife. The man was dealt a 6, and it made him choke on the air in his throat.

The instant after Balot's second card was dealt, she heard the man's voice: "Double down." Before she could stop herself she glanced at the man's cards to double-check what he had. A total of fifteen.

A losing hand, according to all logic. Judging by the way the other players were all watching the hand like hawks, Balot wasn't the only one interested in the outcome of the draw.

It was an 8. Total twenty-three, and bust. The man's face crumpled.

Suddenly Balot realized she ought to think about her own cards. A 7 and jack. A hand to stay.

Somehow her cards were making less of an impression on her than they had been. Not that she was doing anything wrong because of this; it was a straightforward choice, her cards dictating the obvious optimal move. Still, there was no doubt she was being distracted by the monocled man and his cards—sucked into his game, as it were.

–Why am I so compelled to watch this man? Is that because of the dealer too?

She really only asked this question in order to distance herself, to try and refocus her mind. But:

–That's right. You're half under the dealer's spell too.

Balot squirmed inside when she heard these words.

–The dealer's ultimate aim is to throw you all off balance, so that you end up acting in ways that you wouldn't normally. That's why he's paying such close attention to all your breathing rhythms and picking his moment so precisely.

–Breathing rhythms?

–The basis of his techniques. Breath manual*, it's called—aiming for that moment when people are at their most vulnerable, just in between breaths. The dealer is playing all sorts of tricks by applying these techniques.*

–Such as?

–Well, there are a number of important points to this game. One of these is the dealer's upcard. As players, that's really the first thing we should be paying attention to. But it's very easy to get sucked in when we see our own cards—they tend to make much more of an impression on us as players.

–Even though the man is concentrating so hard on the game?

–You can't really call that *concentrating.* Absorbed*, maybe, but it's not the same thing.*

Oeufcoque was coming across as somewhat harsh now, and Balot straightened her posture in response. Oeufcoque continued.

–You could say that one of the dealer's tricks is to manipulate the players' impressions of the game. He senses how the players feel, latches on to this, and gradually shifts their perceptions so that they lose their grip on how their game is actually going. It's a clever trick, and one that you fell for too.

–Who, me?

–The man at the end is completely under the dealer's spell. Whether or not the other players start copying the man's style of play, at the very least his game is likely to leave a lasting impression. The seeds of influence are planted, and all the dealer has to do now is cultivate them, make them grow.

–How?

–Why don't you and I play a little game?

Balot's eyes widened. In another world, it had become Balot's turn at blackjack.

–Stay.

The dealer then proceeded to reveal his hidden card. A 7. Total eleven.

He drew once more, bringing his total to eighteen.

Balot's chips were taken in by the house again, but the focus of her interest had shifted elsewhere.

–What sort of game?

–From now on a player will leave the table at every new shuffle. Let's try and guess which one.

–Leave the table? How can you know a thing like that?

–There's less than an hour to go before this dealer moves on. He's worked hard to bring the punters here under his spell and doesn't want another dealer taking over and reaping the benefit.

Oeufcoque spoke as if the dealer was a big game hunter on the trail of his trophy beasts.

–But what about if someone else comes and joins the table?

–Unlikely at this point. Certainly the dealer isn't expecting it.

–Why not?

–Since we arrived at this table the dealer stopped looking out at his surroundings. He's been deliberately cultivating the impression that this is a close-knit table of friends all playing together—a closed shop to outsiders.

Balot didn't ask him how he knew all this. As far as she was concerned her hands were cocooned in a pair of magic gloves, founts of infinite knowledge and wisdom. Balot just sat there, deeply impressed.

–Why only one at a time, though?

–Everyone breathes differently, with different rhythms. If the dealer wants to be certain, that's what happens. This dealer intends to pluck *the players at his table one by one, thoroughly emptying their pockets.*

She hadn't really noticed until now, but Balot's two cards had come. Jack and king, total twenty. She didn't need to look at the upcard to know what her move would be. Balot more or less ignored her own cards and turned her attention to the other players instead.

–The woman.

That was Balot's guess. The monocled man might have been losing heavily, but she didn't think

he was the type to give up that easily. The old man was playing steadily and going nowhere in a hurry. If he did move, it would be on the lady's orders, to accompany her, probably. And if anyone was going to be the first to leave it would probably be that fat lady; she was betting extravagantly, losing heavily. Even if she wanted to stay on, it wouldn't be too long before she ran out of chips, surely?

–Fine. So if the woman is the one to stand at the next shuffle, you win.

–Why, who do you think it'll be?

It was Balot's turn. The dealer was smiling at her, patiently waiting for her to call. It was a gentle smile, inviting. Doing her best to fight it, she calmly called out her intention to stay.

The result of the hand was that Balot was the only winner. The monocled man, red-faced, called a waiter over and snatched a glass of gin off his tray, gulping it down to try and cool off in the face of the heat of the battle.

–The man on the right.

Balot was a little surprised at Oeufcoque's answer—the monocled man seemed so *into* the game after all.

–Anyhow, let's enjoy the game as it unfolds and pray that no one else joins the table.

Balot felt somewhat placated and placed her chips in front of her. Everyone's chips were now down, and the cards were dealt. Balot barely paid attention to her own cards anymore, focusing instead on the piles of chips in front of the monocled man and the fat lady respectively.

The man bet a minimum of five hundred dollars on every hand, doubling down whenever the opportunity presented itself.

The woman's bets fluctuated randomly between around three hundred and a thousand dollars at a time.

Neither showed the slightest inclination of wanting to leave their seats. As long as their bankrolls were intact, wild horses couldn't drag them away.

The next interesting development came at around ten hands after the shuffle. The monocled man had a seventeen in front of him and boldly charged on, hitting. The card he drew was a 4. Total twenty-one—the monocled man was the only winner.

"A prudent decision, if I may be so bold as to say so, sir," the dealer said, without missing a beat, as he placed the cards in the discard pile. As he did so he placed the 4—the card that had brought the man's hand up to the elusive winning total—on the side, as if he were admiring something precious. Balot felt something akin to an electric shock down her spine and rubbed the back of her neck in a reflex action as she *snarced* Oeufcoque.

–Did the dealer say that on purpose? To manipulate him? Not just out of politeness?

–Hmm…politeness is, in itself, a form of manipulation, of course. But you're right, that was *somewhat over the top…*

–The dealer was talking as if the man in the monocle was something special. What a kiss-ass!

–Well, some people like having their asses kissed, as you put it. And it opens up a chink in their armor. This dealer's got it all worked out—which words he needs to use with which person in order to lay them bare. So that they enjoy themselves even as they're losing, being bled dry of their last dollar.

Balot's nose wrinkled as if she smelled something burning. *To enjoy yourself even as you're losing*. This was all that a lot of people wanted, she supposed. Amusement was king. To head in

with a cool head and a steady hand—this was the sort of player the casino really didn't want.

The festive, elegant atmosphere, the service *nonpareil*, the elegant courtesy—strip that away and all that remained was the house edge that shaved away at the customers' chips, gently but surely. That was why it was called the edge after all; it was as deadly and as certain as the sharpest of knives.

It was then that it occurred to Balot that she really could lose her bankroll here.

What would happen if she had to start all over? What about the trial? And would she really end up a suspect of crimes against the Commonwealth? Could she go back to an existence where all that was left was to endure, day in, day out? Her skin crawled at the thought.

Suddenly the game she was playing didn't seem so interesting anymore. She had lost all thought of amusement. Everything was riding on this battle—her whole world. She couldn't allow herself to be flustered by a dealer such as this one.

–Cool it.

A strong admonition from Oeufcoque. He sounded blunt—harsh, even—but it was a clear sign of just how attuned he was to Balot's thoughts and feelings. He wasn't about to let her make a grave mistake.

–Before you go charging in, you need to have the full measure of your opponent. Forewarned is forearmed.

Balot squeezed her left hand in lieu of a nod. Tightly. Then she focused her full attention on the game at hand. On the dealer. On the other players. And on the cards. Telling herself that the long and winding road could yet be the shortest and surest route to her final destination. After all, hadn't Oeufcoque and the Doctor been right about everything so far, showing her the best path to take?

Oeufcoque's words were sinking in properly. *The full measure of your opponent*—Oeufcoque wasn't just helping her out of a rut. He was teaching her. Empowering her. Showing her how to fight against her own powerlessness. So that she could win. He was showing her that she had a chance, a choice. She felt fiercely in tune with the mouse at that moment.

Her reverie was interrupted by the voice of the monocled man. "Is this the sort of hand I should hit with, would you say?" He was asking, of all people, the dealer.

The man's total was fifteen.

The dealer's upcard was 8.

It was a delicate call, certainly. But the dealer answered without hesitation. "It depends on the circumstances, of course, but if you were playing by the book then the correct move would be to hit, sir."

A first-class dealer was always ready to respond to such questions from the player. He would have all the possible combinations memorized, ready to reel them off pat. A dealer who didn't know the 290-odd possibilities "by the book" wasn't a first-class dealer.

"Having said that, it's up to the player's mood whether he wants to double down," the dealer continued calmly.

Doubling down seemed to have become something of a signature tune for the monocled man.

"Of course, those who want to determine the flow of the game have to be prepared to pay the price."

The monocled man nodded in agreement with the dealer's words and boldly hit. A jack to his fifteen. Bust.

But the man now had his eyes closed; he seemed to take at face value the dealer's suggestion that it was inevitable he had to pay the price and just shrugged his shoulders.

–It's a double bind.

–A double bind?

–That's what it's called when you manage to implant an idea in your opponent's mind, inducing them to act in a certain way. The way the dealer handled that then, by mentioning the doubling down—it made hitting become the default option for the player.

–But that was the right decision, wasn't it?

–As a basic tactic, yes, it was the right move. But the basic tactics stop being of any use once you're under the dealer's spell. What he's doing is conditioning the man's mind, ridding him of the possibility of any move but hitting.

–Ridding him…?

–Doubling down—that's quite a big call to make, not one you do lightly. By drawing focus to the difficult move and juxtaposing it with an easier one, the dealer is basically suggesting that the only really sensible move is the easier one—to hit. All other possibilities are forgotten. On top of that, the dealer appealed to the rather vague and ambiguous idea of the "player's mood." Caught between the rock and the hard place of the difficult decision and the ambiguous instruction, the player ends up choosing the "only" sensible option, which in fact is nothing of the sort. That's what the double bind is.

–So what* should *the man have done?

–What he should or shouldn't have done isn't really the issue. What the man should have been focusing on—or rather, resigning himself to—was the fact that he had a losing hand. But now he only has eyes for victory. He's convinced himself, or allowed himself to be duped into believing, that losing along the way is a necessary part, a price that he has to pay in order to achieve his ultimate goal. But it's not. A losing hand is just a losing hand, nothing more, nothing less.

The monocled man and the fat lady played in the same way: the more cards they drew, the more they focused on their own hands, paying less and less attention to the dealer's cards.

"Double down," called the man, only a couple of hands later. He drew a 9 to his existing hand of thirteen and went bust.

The dealer's upcard was a 6—playing by the book, the man should have stayed.

It was the beginning of the end for the monocled man. He might have been crumbling silently up to this point, but now he started crashing down with a roar. Perhaps he was playing with "scared money"—money he shouldn't have been touching, money meant for living expenses or even to pay his hotel bill during his stay. Either way, he was now on the edge, in sharp contrast to the woman, who seemed to be enjoying herself in a far healthier manner, even as she frittered away her chips.

The man started doubling down on hands such as fifteen and sixteen, busting left, right, and center. He bet large amounts on single hands and then seemed largely oblivious even when the dealer had an ace as his upcard, recklessly doubling down regardless. The dealer started commenting on the man's choices, bolstering up his recklessness, and the man clung to these crumbs of comfort.

In true Confucian style, the dealer said, "Doubling down is an extremely aggressive move.

Some hands are suited more for attacking, others for defending."

The dealer said, "Of all the players I've ever met, sir, may I say that an attacking style seems to suit you the best."

The dealer said, "Do please take all the time you need to decide whether this is the place to press your advantage, sir."

The dealer said, "Regrets at what *might have been* are the surest way to ruin your game. Do make sure you play as your heart tells you—that's the best way to ensure you have no regrets. Going with your gut instinct is often best."

The dealer had the monocled man by the snout, well and truly. The lady, too, seemed to be responding—she was slowly but surely increasing her bets. Oeufcoque, on the other hand, responded to each of the dealer's precepts with increasingly disdainful commentary.

Thus:

–Attacking, defending. What does that even mean in the context of this game? Nothing—they're completely ambiguous terms. As is the idea of hands "suiting" a particular style of play. All this sort of talk does is hook the player into going along with the dealer.

Then:

–"Do take all the time you need to decide"—that's just a bind to force his hand. The only "choice" left in the man's mind is *to double down.*

And:

–A bust is a bust, full stop. You can give it whatever name you like, call it "regrets" or what have you, but it's not going to help you one bit. Even if the game does throw him up the odd high-paying blackjack, that's not going to change the fact that overall the man is hemorrhaging money.

At each step Oeufcoque was warning Balot, but he was also teaching her the game. And in a far easier and more effective manner than any sort of long-winded plan concocted at the planning table.

The monocled man and the fat lady were now losing money hand over fist. Both were down well over thirty thousand dollars.

–What sort of person is this dealer?

–A bit of a prima donna. Good at his job, a real rainmaker. He knows the game inside out and he's good with the customers. As far as the casino is concerned, he's a real golden goose—and he knows it.

–I don't like him.

–Fine. Just don't let him know that you don't like him.

–What do you want me to do?

–When you win, smile. When you lose, sulk.

She did just that for the next few hands, and the card shoe started running low.

The monocled man had switched to lower value bets, a hundred dollars a hand or even less.

–Looks like I win our little game. Oeufcoque's voice was confident.

They entered the final game of the card shoe—they had hit the red card, signifying time to reshuffle at the end of the hand.

It was also the end of the road for the monocled man. He had hit on twelve, drawn a 10, gone bust, and run out of chips. The reason he had switched to lower bets was simply because he had started to run out of money. Now he *had* run out.

The shuffle for the next game started, and as it did the man stood up and collected the hat and coat that he had checked.

“Not a good game for me, was it?” he asked the dealer.

“Some days you need to pay the price in order to make sure your luck flows smoothly on other days,” the dealer replied, his face serious.

The monocled man nodded. Then he left.

The talk at the table during the next shuffle was solely focused around the cause of the monocled man's defeat. The Doctor set the ball rolling, and the woman asked the dealer his opinion. The dealer wouldn't budge from his stated view that it was a necessary and inevitable price all gamblers had to pay once in a while, whereas the old man said that it was because he had become too heated, too passionate, so much so that his luck had deserted him.

–His defeat was inevitable.

Oeufcoque summed it up the best and the most succinctly.

–He got too caught up in his own cards, hitting too much, doubling down on high bets, too impressed by the idea of getting that magical twenty-one. Bound by these severe handicaps he was no more than a sitting duck in the dealer's sights. In particular, he was far too attached to his small cards.

–Small cards?

–Whatever way you break down the odds, the small cards—cards with a face value of six and below—are advantageous to the dealer. In this case, our dealer kept on using the word "attack" in order to delude the man into drawing more and more of them.

The man in question was now nowhere to be seen. He was like the very cards that he had played, disappearing without a trace moments after a hand was declared bust. But he wasn't the sort who was likely to run off and lick his wounds, reflecting on what went wrong and learning a valuable lesson. No. More likely, he was the sort who'd be back sooner rather than later, like a dog to its own vomit, aiming for that glorious victory that remained *just* out of reach even as he plunged headfirst into bankruptcy.

Such was the bittersweet lingering memory of the world of pleasure. Balot found it difficult to feel too sorry for him, though. The man still had something of a future, and he was always going to wake up tomorrow feeling fine regardless of what the outcome at the table had been. In stark contrast to Balot, who *needed* the win. The thing that concerned her was not the fact that the man had lost. It was the fact that he had been *made* to lose.

The spectacular victory that the man had been aiming for had never really existed. All that had happened was the man had had the sweet scent of victory wafted under his nose, leading him ever farther down the road to ruin. He'd even been allowed to taste victory, briefly, but temporarily—the dealer had made sure of that. It was part of the dealer's act, part of the web of illusion that the casino sold, wrapped up in such pretty little boxes.

How to cut your way through that tangled web of lies? Without a proper plan, based on logic and a sound foundation, all was folly. The desire to win—all this gave you was a step up on the stairway that led to the harsh reality of ignominious defeat. Just like the Mardock, the Stairway to Heaven, that statue that epitomized all that was ambitious and dangerous about the city.

As Balot was thinking about all this, Oeufcoque's next words floated up on her hand.

–Looks like I won our first game.

Oeufcoque seemed as casual as ever, which made Balot want to dig her heels in.

–Well, I'm going to win the next one.

–Let's start it right now, then. The woman or the old man—who's going to leave the table

first?

–The woman, definitely.

–I'll choose the old man.

–Because I went for the lady?

–No. I was always going to choose the old man. Definitely.

Balot couldn't help but be surprised. How on earth was the old man, clearly an accomplished player and with the results to prove it, going to be hounded out before the fat lady who spent money like a drunken sailor?

The shuffle had finished. This time it was the lady who inserted the red marker into the cards. The dealer cut the cards again in a well-practiced movement, and it was time for the fourth round since Balot and the Doctor had taken their seats.

The old man was now effectively on the far right, the monocled man having left a vacant spot. The dealer now dealt to the old man's tempo, reading his breathing patterns like a book. The old man was a much tougher nut to crack than the monocled man, however. Nothing seemed to perturb him. The lady next to him bet extravagantly, and the Doctor gave a convincing impression of someone betting extravagantly, and this made the old man's actions seem particularly composed by contrast.

The dealer occasionally engaged him in conversation, offering his Confucianesque platitudes as before, but not in a way obviously designed to lead the old man astray, as with the monocled man.

The dealer said, "You certainly do seem to know this game inside out, sir. I bet people are always coming to you for advice."

The dealer said, "There aren't many people on this floor who know how to enjoy the game as much as you, sir."

The dealer said, "They say that the more experience you have of life, the more likely you are to enjoy this game in a meaningful way. It seems to me, sir, that you have it all worked out—you know how to enjoy the game in the company of others as much as you play for your own benefit."

The dealer said, "That hit was the obvious choice, wasn't it, sir, considering the number of chips you had riding on that hand?"

The old man responded to the last of these sayings. "No, no, it was actually rather a reckless move on my part. Normally I try not to let the number of chips affect my game."

The old man corrected the dealer without a second thought, and the dealer looked suitably chastened, as if he had spoken out of place and overstepped the mark. He bowed his head slightly.

The old man was a circumspect player, and his cautious style of play was particularly in evidence when he was dealt a blackjack.

His judgment call with such a hand—an ace and jack—told Balot everything she needed to know about his style of play.

"Even money," called the old man. This was a special move that a player could make only when they had been dealt twenty-one. This declaration guaranteed the player victory—at the expense of reducing his payout from one and a half times the original stake to evens.

The only advantage to this move was to circumvent the possibility of a draw with the dealer; if the dealer drew twenty-one as well, the player would still win even money. It was, in other words, a particularly cautious move.

The dealer said nothing. It was hard to imagine that he was doing anything to string the old man

along.

According to Oeufcoque, though, this too must still have been some part of the dealer's strategy to induce the player to give up all his chips one way or another. Balot just couldn't quite work out how—yet.

But then Balot noticed something out of the ordinary.

The woman's losses were increasing exponentially. It was almost as if she were deliberately trying to throw her money down the drain. It was just after the fifteen-hand mark, and she was already down by well over seventy thousand dollars.

Despite this, the woman showed no sign of worrying about where her next chips were coming from. It was as if she had a bank of chips on hand that she could draw from without limit whenever hers needed replenishing.

Then Balot had her epiphany.

The woman *did* have a bank of chips at hand. A bank that guarded the chips carefully, sometimes even increasing the available number, ever so steadily.

The woman hit on a thirteen, drawing a 10. Bust. Bad luck, plain and simple—it was the right move, nothing wrong about her style of play.

But the number of chips she had riding on just that one hand—now, that was something else. The dealer raked in well over a thousand dollars from her.

Balot, the Doctor, and the old man all won that hand.

In other words, the lady was the only one who lagged behind.

Not that this seemed to bother her in the slightest. "I just have this feeling that my luck's about to turn any minute," she murmured.

To whom? To the old man, of course. "Well, why don't you give your luck a run for its money, then," he replied, a broad, generous smile covering his face.

He had given his permission.

The woman grabbed a pile of chips with her chubby fingers. Where from? The old man's basket of chips, of course.

–I see…

Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque, almost unthinkingly.

–So that's how she does it. I did wonder how she was able to bet so much without worrying.

–Ah, so you've realized what was bankrolling her bankroll?

–Is that why you chose the old man to leave the table first?

–Naturally.

–No fair!

She felt Oeufcoque chuckling somewhere at the back of her hand.

Balot had got it all wrong. At first she thought that the old man was being paraded about by the younger lady, the helpless gent reliant on the woman's kindness. But that was all an act that he put on for her sake; in reality, she was the one who was utterly dependent on him.

–Don't be too hard on yourself, Balot. You worked it out for yourself and pretty quickly too. That's impressive—you're allowed to give yourself a little pat on the back once in a while, you know, particularly when you deserve it.

In other words, the plump lady didn't have any chips of her own. Only those that she was

allowed to play with. The dealer knew this all too well—it would have been one of the first things he worked out. And *that's* where he was targeting his manipulative inducements.

"It's funny—I can feel that I'm *about* to start winning, but I never quite seem to get there…" the woman grumbled.

The dealer consoled her with platitudes. "Perhaps we haven't quite served enough time at the game for the cards to start taking a liking to us yet, madam?"

"What do you think I need to do in order to start winning more?"

"My best advice is to try out a number of different things for yourself, all the while taking advice from a player who knows the game well," replied the dealer.

On the surface the scene seemed straightforward—a case of the dealer gently flattering his two customers. This was only the tip of the iceberg, though; much more was going on under the surface.

–The dealer is appealing to the old man's sense of chivalry. He's being set up as the white knight in shining armor, with the woman being set up as the damsel in distress.

This was Oeufcoque's analysis of the scene as it played out.

–The dealer didn't really have to do much to make things go his way. The old man already felt chivalrous, and the woman has long suffered from damsel-in-distress syndrome. There were plenty of opportunities for the dealer to hand them the poisoned apple.

–But the old man's been contradicting the dealer!

–That's all part of the dealer's plan…

–What do you mean?

–The dealer's deliberately been feeding him half-mistakes, getting the old man to correct him. In doing so, the words are coming out of the old man's mouth. It's much easier to get him to act accordingly. After all, if the old man is the one saying the words, he's hardly going to expect that they've been planted in his mouth. He thinks he's acting of his own free will, but really he's at the dealer's beck and call.

Balot's head started to spin. She couldn't help but be impressed at how meticulously the dealer had planned the whole situation.

Not only that, to look at him you wouldn't have the slightest inkling that he was being so manipulative. Ingenious.

–Now then, back to our little game. Let's see how it's progressing.

Oeufcoque was talking about the game where they guessed who would leave the table first, of course, not the card game.

–I still think it'll be the woman.

Balot stuck to her guns. The old man might have been passing on some of his chips to the woman, but he showed no sign of running out anytime soon. And if the old man's pride was indeed the key to the dealer's success in manipulating him, well, wouldn't that very same pride ensure that he wouldn't run out of chips in the near future?

Before long the game was over—the red marker card appeared again, just at a point when the dealer had bust. There was a pause. Just as Balot thought, the old man still had his large pile of chips intact.

"Hmm, couldn't quite increase my pile as quickly as I would have liked," said the old man, apparently out of nowhere. As he did so he called over one of the attendants to have him fetch his hat and coat. It was all Balot could do not to show her disbelief on her face.

The old man rose. He did have plenty of chips left, of course. But—incredibly, to Balot—he passed them all over to the lady. Grinning, the lady took hold of them all. The old man was telling the whole table, in deed and in word, that he'd had his fill of fun for the day. Then he sauntered over to the bar.

–The inevitable conclusion for a proud player. He knows himself well enough, including his own limits. Rather than tire himself out, carry on past the point of his concentration, and start losing, he'd rather quit while he's ahead. He presents his lady with her bounty, the spoils of his conquest, then withdraws while the going is still good, his head held high.

Balot was stunned. She hadn't even considered the old man's psychology, his inner workings. It was only now that Oeufcoque pointed all this out that she started to wonder how the old man had come to be with the lady in the first place—what he offered her and what he sought from her in return.

–So, how did you enjoy our little game?

–Not much. I didn't win either time.

–Still, it's fulfilled its objective.

–Objective?

–You were talking to me, focusing on our little side bet, which meant that your mind was taken off the dealer's wiles. I was concerned that he might have left a powerful impression on you otherwise—one that might have distracted you from our ultimate goal.

Balot had had an inkling all along that this was what Oeufcoque had been doing, but now that he had confirmed it to her so bluntly she wasn't really sure what to say to him. As she searched for the words, Oeufcoque continued in a somewhat mischievous tone.

–You see, when it comes to influencing you*, I've got a massive advantage over the dealer. He doesn't have any way of speaking to you directly, after all.*

Balot's brow wrinkled ever so slightly at Oeufcoque's tactlessness.

–There's no need to tease me about it.

–The thing is, now that you know how this sort of manipulation works, you're going to be on the lookout for it. It's going to be much easier for you to resist. Not only that, if you play your cards right—metaphorically as well as literally—then you'll be able to turn the tables, work out exactly what the dealer is trying to do, and use it to manipulate him.

Oeufcoque casually added a throwaway remark:

–Because neither the Doctor nor I would be able to manipulate the dealer in the way that we'll need to in order to win big.

This wasn't a question of impressions or influence or manipulation anymore. Neither was it a matter of whether what they were doing was right or wrong—it wasn't a big deal, in the grander scheme of things. The only really important question now was this: *was Balot up to the task?*

–I want to believe you, Oeufcoque. Both you and the Doctor. Is that a bad thing? Am I being manipulated?

–That's a judgment call for you to make, after you've honed your own decision-making faculties. All I can say is that this is the path that you've chosen in order to try and solve your case.

–But I don't think I can win on my own!

–You won't have to. One of our chief tasks is to be here to support you. And it's your free

will, your choice, that determines exactly how, and if, you want to use us. Whether you want to use the plan that we suggest.

–Are you trying to influence me right now? Manipulate me into acting the way you want me to?

–Yes, I am. I want you to use *me. To let me prove my* usefulness.

Oeufcoque answered without a moment's hesitation. He continued, *–I'm a Living Unit. A tool.*

Balot's eyes narrowed.

–My pride is not that different from the sort of pride that old man had. I can define my own sense of self-worth—my usefulness*—only in terms of how my actions affect other people. I may have my own values, but I need to constantly put them to the test, to see if they have any value in relation to other people, the real world.*

–But I* do *want to use you. Because…because you make me feel like I could do things for myself, even without you.

As far as Balot was concerned, *this* was the ultimate *usefulness* that Oeufcoque could provide for her. Oeufcoque never tried to dominate people in body or in mind. He always did his utmost to treat them as equals.

–I want to use you* properly. *I never want to betray you again.

–Thanks, Balot.

Oeufcoque's words rose once more in her hand.

–Looks like I've ended up with a good partner.

The dealer finished shuffling and the Doctor placed the red marker into the cards.

–I'm going to display a running point tally.

Oeufcoque's instructions couldn't have been more decisive.

–We're ramping the plan up to the next stage. We need to let the Doctor know.

Balot placed her chips down and casually tapped the table with her fingertips.

The Doctor picked up on this immediately. As would anyone steeped in his current adopted persona of the aging playboy.

"Can't wait for the next set of cards, eh?"

–Yes, Uncle. It's starting to get really interesting. I'm going to try* super hard *from now on.

The Doctor's expression was that of a man thoroughly intoxicated by his surroundings. You had to look very closely indeed to notice that his eyes were still steely and clear.

"That's quite a statement, young lady! Your uncle's most proud of you."

The Doctor's act was as convincing as ever—the indulgent uncle watching benevolently over his promising young charge.

Everyone could now see that Balot was concentrating terribly hard on the game. As if she were trying her damnedest to win. Nothing unusual about that, of course. Most people who sat down at this table felt the same way. The only difference was that most people weren't working toward a plan that would help them win with *absolute certainty*. Even Balot didn't understand the full implications of what it meant to have such a plan in place.

The players had all placed their chips on the table, and just as the hand was about to commence, a whole new set of figures floated up on Balot's hand.

–Do you know how to read this point system?

Balot sensed that her whole left hand was now wrapped in a list of numbers. The current point tally and the breakdown of the cards. Each point total had a corresponding minimum and maximum bet.

–No problem. I can work it out.

Balot absorbed the data in the table deftly. Basically, the higher the point tally the more chips you bet on a particular hand, and the lower the points the less you bet. A rudimentary card-counting system called the ace-five count.

The principles were that the ace was the most advantageous card for the player, and the 5 was the best card for the house. The other cards were also ranked, in varying degrees, according to how advantageous they were for either the player or the house. So, whenever an ace was drawn, you subtracted two points, and whenever a 5 was drawn you added two points. Any card between 2 and 6 (other than 5) gave you one point. The 7, 8, and 9 were neutral. Any card worth ten meant you subtracted a point. And so you came up with an overall point tally. Every time the tally moved past a certain milestone, you changed the amount you bet on a single hand. Ten points and above, between five and ten points, fewer than five, between zero and minus five, lower than minus five; each point tally was allocated a different betting increment.

This rudimentary card-counting system was entirely compatible with the playing system they

already had in place; the bankroll management system on Balot's right hand would now also serve to keep track of their profits and losses according to the new card-counting system. Whereas previously they had been more or less reliant on luck in order to win, now they were going to be able to take the game to the casino.

Balot placed three hundred dollars on the table.

Right at that moment, taking into consideration all the cards that were on the table, the point tally was plus two.

The cards in front of Balot were 8 and 6, bringing her total to fourteen.

The dealer's upcard was 9. The correct tactic, according to the grid, was to hit.

The lady had sixteen but fought on, resolute, with a hit. She drew a 2, bringing her total to eighteen.

The point tally on Balot's hand shifted as an extra point was added—the total was now plus three.

The Doctor drew a 4 on thirteen, taking his total to seventeen. The point tally changed to plus four.

Balot hit, drew a 6, and was now at twenty. Stay, obviously. Point tally: plus five.

The dealer flipped over his hidden card. A 9. The point tally remained unchanged.

The dealer's total was eighteen—Balot and the lady were the winners this hand.

The cards on the table were moved to the discard pile, and Balot picked up her chips. Now the point tally became meaningful. Plus five. In accordance with the new tally, Balot increased her bet from three hundred to six hundred dollars.

Balot's cards were 6 and 7, total thirteen. The lady and the

Doctor both had small cards, 6 or less. The dealer's upcard was 6.

The woman and the Doctor both drew steadily until they bust. Balot played in accordance with the tactical grid on her hand and stayed. The dealer revealed a 2, then drew another card in accordance with the rules, a 4. He drew again, a 5 this time, bringing his total to seventeen.

Balot had lost. The player had been at the disadvantage in this hand due to the run of small cards. At this point, Balot had to grin and bear it, in hope of a better future. For the point tally had now increased to plus eight. Patience was, in this instance, a virtue that was going to reap its reward before too long.

Balot put forward another six hundred dollars' worth of chips as her stake for her next hand, just as the point tally demanded. She was waiting for her opportunity. Suddenly she realized that the dealer was looking at her. Without a moment's hesitation, the Doctor chimed in with his two cents' worth.

"That's right, good, good. Where's the fun in betting in drips and drabs all the time?"

Balot raised her head a little and leaned to one side.

–You *were the one who said that this was a game of endurance, Uncle…*

"Sure, sure. But there's no point in enduring *needlessly*, just for the sake of it. You'll just end up fit to burst with all the stress that builds up. No need to hold back here—let it all out!"

The Doctor's cover story had its desired effect of drawing some of the dealer's attention away from Balot.

The Doctor had sixteen, and hit. The card was a 3. Stay.

It occurred to Balot for the first time that the Doctor wasn't doing too badly, considering that he didn't have Oeufcoque to help him out, and he had managed to hold on to his chips and more.

His bankroll, tactics, and chip stats must have been firmly there, inside his head, the Doctor computing furiously behind his facade.

Balot hit on her sixteen, just like the Doctor, but she drew an 8 and bust.

Her six hundred dollar stake disappeared along with the cards.

That seemed to do the trick—the dealer appeared to take his eyes off Balot.

He wouldn't have imagined in a million years that she was actually card counting. But as soon as anyone showed the slightest signs of playing like they *might* be doing so, the dealer was programmed to hone in on them, just in case. Proof that he was, indeed, a first-class dealer.

The point tally hovered around the plus five mark for some time. At one point it reached plus nine, but a number of minus cards followed in quick succession. Balot started to feel a little worried—*what if the cards continued in this way, never showing a decisive opening?* But all she could do was sit there and play the hands that she was dealt.

Then, just as they started getting into the game, something happened. The woman won big—well, it had been bound to happen sometime, probably—and drew a blackjack on a stake well in excess of a thousand dollars. The dealer congratulated her—conspicuously—and at the same time consoled the Doctor, who had bust, the dealer suggesting that he was *so* close.

"That's the way the game goes, I'm afraid, sir. Whenever someone wins big, there's always going to be someone next to them who loses. On the other hand, the opposite is also true, so that's something you have to look forward to."

In response, the Doctor turned away from the lady and toward Balot. "It's not as if we're going to keep on losing forever. If we need to pay our dues before Lady Luck finally decides to smile on us then so be it—let's not begrudge her."

So saying, the Doctor bet on the next hand. Big.

Balot *snarced* Oeufcoque.

–Did the Doctor do all that deliberately?

–Of course. He waited until the dealer honed in on his target and pounced. He's playing the dealer in return, turning the dealer's tricks back on him. This idea that when one player loses, the other inevitably wins. What the dealer is trying to do is to get the Doctor to bet big once the woman starts losing. The woman is caught in the dealer's snare right now, and the dealer is going to move straight on to the Doctor once the woman's sucked dry. He's leaving you till last.

Leaving her till last. The very thought brought up nauseating memories for Balot. The idea that she was *dessert*, something to be *savored* at the end of everything. She remembered how one of her customers back in the old days told her that her name made her sound delicious…

Something inside Balot stirred. Something ruthless. *So, you want to leave me to enjoy at the end, do you? Well, I'll be waiting for you, smiling sweetly. I'll be a juicy, ripe apple, ever so inviting, right up until the moment you bite into me and discover the razor blade waiting for you inside…*

These thoughts spun around in Balot's head as she assiduously tracked the ebb and flow of the point tally. A casual onlooker wouldn't have been able to spot any rhyme or reason in the fluctuations of Balot's betting patterns, and neither could the lady, who commented, "What a fickle little thing you are, my dear, flitting from one thing to another. I remember a time when I myself was like that, once…"

Whether it was because she had just won a big payout, or whether it was her natural high spirits, the lady seemed in exceedingly good humor. Balot nodded meekly, as if to acknowledge

that she was indeed feeling adventurous, wanting to try out all sorts of different things. The lady nodded back—*good for you*. Her large hands grabbed an even larger handful of chips, and she poured them out onto the table.

"I wonder if luck is flowing my way yet? I can feel something big about to burst…" The lady's chips might as well have been large hunks of bloody meat that she was throwing to the piranhas that were the cards.

Far from satisfying their hunger, though, all she was doing was whetting their appetite.

She was right about one thing, though—something big *was* coming. Balot felt it too. Something from beyond the point tally. Balot tried to pin down this indefinable *something* of a feeling.

It wasn't a feeling exactly like the one she had when firing a gun, nor was it like what she felt when she was in hot pursuit of the roulette ball. It was familiar and strange all at the same time, as if there were some sort of *pattern*, something she was intimately familiar with, except that the stages were all mixed up. She couldn't quite work out what it was she was trying find; it seemed to ebb and flow, appear and disappear. *How to nail it?* She thought deep and hard.

By the time they had entered the middle stages of the game, the point tally had increased substantially. From plus five to plus eight, then plus eight to plus eleven.

Got it! It was the moment the point tally had moved from plus eleven to plus thirteen.

For the first time since the game had started, Balot acted as if she were emulating the lady, piling up her chips in a huge, haphazard stack and shoving them onto the board all at once.

The lady noticed and looked at her. So did the dealer. Balot was riding the crest of the wave. The small cards had drawn the wave out, and now the surfing conditions were ideal for the player.

The cards were dealt. Balot received a 9—and another 9. Her attention immediately turned to the upcard: 7. It was a close call, but she had to go for it.

The lady hit on fifteen and bust. The Doctor had thirteen and also hit, and also bust.

Balot touched the cards with her hands for the first time since she sat had down at the table.

–Split, please.

She used her index fingers on either hand to draw the two cards apart, left and right. Then she placed another pile of chips, equal to her original pile, next to one of the cards. She wasn't so much concerned about what individual cards would come next as what the *pattern* was.

The dealer drew her new cards. A jack for the card on her right.

–Stay.

Then, in perfect timing with her breathing, an ace for her left hand. Now she had a total of nineteen for her right hand, twenty for her left. Everyone at the table now expected Balot to win.

–Stay.

Balot watched carefully as the dealer turned his hidden card over. She felt the wave ebbing and flowing. Her head grew hazy, her muscles rigid.

The dealer revealed an 8. Total fifteen. This too was part of the overall pattern—and, as the dealer was now obliged to draw another card, the wave wasn't over yet.

Balot closed her eyes. *What's the most important thing now?* she thought.

She wondered whether she should ask Oeufcoque for advice, but that thought was abruptly checked. The answer had been revealed to her as she opened her eyes.

The dealer had drawn a 6. Total twenty-one—Balot's hands had both snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Her chips disappeared, her cards disappeared. But Balot wasn't even watching anymore. It wasn't as if she had anything to learn from this hand. Yet all had become clear. *That*

was all that mattered. She felt the pattern coming together in intricate detail. It was as if the individual hands were miniatures, microcosms for the game as a whole.

And it wasn't possible to ignore the miniatures, to skip over the hands as if they somehow obliterated the hands that came before them. They were all interconnected.

The losses—and the winnings—would always remain, after all…

The dealer said something to Balot. Consoling her, perhaps. Then he carried on dealing the cards. *No more inducements necessary here*, his manner said. *My work on this one is well and truly done.*

The point tally moved from plus six to plus ten, up to plus fourteen, then back down to plus twelve.

Then Balot felt it again. Like a shadow in the distance, she could just sense its contours taking shape.

Balot checked what the maximum amount was she was allowed to bet, according to Oeufcoque's bankroll management system. Then she bet the maximum amount. The basic unit was three hundred dollars, so the upper limit was ten times that, three thousand dollars. She piled a number of chips together so that she held this total in her hand, then laid it on the table.

The lady flinched visibly. The dealer, by contrast, showed no outward sign of interest—as was only appropriate for a dealer of his rank and training.

The Doctor whistled appreciatively, and Balot awaited her next hand from behind her three thousand dollar fortress.

The lady and the Doctor were each dealt a 10. The point tally moved from plus twelve to plus ten.

Balot was dealt a 5. This added two points to the tally, bringing it back up to plus twelve.

The point tally continued to rise as she waited for her second card.

Balot's second card was finally dealt: another 5.

The point tally stood at plus seventeen, and the dealer's upcard was a 2.

The lady hit, drew an 8, bust.

The Doctor hit. He had a sixteen, drew a 2, and chose to stay.

The point tally was now plus nineteen—the highest it had been since Balot had started counting the cards. Balot's cards were 5 and 5, a total of ten.

The dealer turned to Balot. Balot called.

–Double down.

The dealer's eyes narrowed. The lady was stunned. Balot was in fact playing by the book—it was the only sensible move, given her hand and that of the dealer's. Still, the amount at stake was far above her previous hands… Balot struggled for a moment and had to force herself to physically pile the chips up.

The dealer stared at the pile now on the table in front of Balot—six thousand dollars' worth of chips. Staked it out, like a hunter his quarry. Mouth watering at the prospect of the sweet, sweet flesh that was being served up to him on a plate. His hand slid over to the card shoe. No sign of foul play—he didn't appear to be dishing out a pre-prepared dud card from the bottom of the deck.

The card came. For the first time since the game began, Balot actually noticed the suit of the card. It was the queen of clubs. It took her total up to twenty. *This* was the razor blade hidden inside the sweet flesh of the fruit…

–Stay.

Without further ado the dealer flipped his own card over. Ace of clubs. With his existing 2, the dealer's total was now thirteen.

He hit again, as prescribed by the rules. It was a 10. The ace in his hand would now be counted as a soft card, its value falling from eleven to one in order to prevent the dealer from going bust. His total now changed to a soft thirteen.

The dealer's fourth card would prove decisive.

The one-eyed jack. Balot sighed a deep sigh of relief, looking at the profile of the face on the card—the black jack, who pushed the dealer over the edge and caused him to bust.

Balot had gone with the flow. It was the only choice she could have made, really. And yet all it would have taken was for the cards to have shifted slightly, one way or another, and she would have been beaten.

As it was, she'd won.

"Wow! What a hand! Is my little niece secretly a magician or something?" The Doctor made a great fuss over Balot's victory—the perfect smokescreen.

Balot lifted her head toward him.

–I just thought that my luck was about to turn, Uncle. Just like the nice lady over there said. I was a little scared, though!

Balot did everything she could to imitate the mannerisms of the lady, and indeed this served perfectly to throw the dealer off the scent. After all, hadn't he just influenced the lady to play recklessly? The lady was even more impressed when the dealer pushed over the two piles of six thousand dollars toward Balot: the original stake and the winnings. The lady was caught up in the moment completely now and practically threw her next lot of chips at the table. She was betting in increments of a thousand dollars at a time. And if she truly thought that her moment had come, that victory was *just* around the corner—well, who knew how much she would start betting? One thing was for sure, though: the dealer was on his way to find out. He had her wrapped around his little finger and insinuated himself further and further into her mind, consoling her when she lost, praising her on the increasingly rare occasions that she won, all the while dishing out his advice.

The dealer said, "Lady Luck seems to be playing a fickle game tonight, madam. I have a feeling that the person who invests the most in their cards is likely to come out on top in the end."

The dealer said, "Everyone wants to be in a good position to take advantage of their lucky streak when it comes. Be sure not to let yours slip from your fingers."

The dealer said, "Victory is such a subjective concept. Everyone should set their own definition of 'victory,' and aim always for that."

The lady, in turn, would throw back questions at the dealer, only to have them answered in the dealer's smooth, inimitable way.

"Do you think I'm playing in a way that's keeping my lucky streak at bay?"

"It's difficult to say, madam, as only you know for sure exactly how far away you are from being able to ride your own lucky streak. It's like being with a lover—only you can know how close you really are to them."

"Ah, yes. Like when you only realize your true feelings for them after you've left them and the moment has passed."

"Exactly, madam. And, forgive me for saying so, but it seems that as a woman of the world, you're experienced enough to know your own feelings."

Even as the dealer was replying, the lady had another fistful of chips in her chubby hands,

ready to continue.

–He's not bad.

Oeufcoque's tone of voice was that of a professional athlete praising the winner at a junior sports day.

–He's got natural talent, I'll give him that. He smells as if it's the most obvious thing in the world that he's able to manipulate people.

–You mean through the double bind and preying on people's breathing patterns?

–Yes, that, but other techniques too. He knows what he's doing, all right.

–Other techniques?

–His choice of words. "Tonight," "in the end," that sort of thing. It's distracting her completely from her bankroll. Classic misdirection. What it comes down to, though, is that he's using any means possible to get her to bet more and more of her chips. His metaphor of a lover was a good one. She swallowed it hook, line, and sinker—the idea that the only way she'll get the chips back is if she puts out…

–Yes, I can believe that about her…

–It could even be that she's experienced just the reverse of that in real life and is now subconsciously trying to put something right the second time around. The dealer is proving an affirmation of that, making her relax her grip on her chips. A simple type of manipulation, but effective nonetheless.

–So you're saying that the dealer is good with words, and that's why he's winning?

–Words, yes, but that's only one part of the picture. What he's doing is selling a dream, a fantasy. He's taking what's in their minds and encouraging them to try and turn it into reality.

Before too long the lady did manage to win big on a hand. For a moment, her fantasy had been fulfilled. She won $7,500, but more importantly she was now in a trance, almost an ecstatic state. As if the lover that she had reluctantly parted company with when he hadn't two cents to rub together had now returned to her as a multi-millionaire and conquering hero.

As the game entered its final stages, the old man who had been playing until recently returned to stand behind the lady and watch her play.

It was almost as if the old man had placed the lady there so that she could lose. His pride was an immovable boulder on this point; when he wasn't there to support her, she was helpless. This was how it was, and how it *should* be.

Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean—and so betwixt the two of them they licked the platter clean.

This was the sort of couple they were.

The red marker appeared and the round came to a close. The woman staggered to her feet. Her face looked thoroughly satiated.

She was spent.

"A good evening to you all," she bid them.

The Doctor replied in kind, "Good evening, madam. I guess we two will have to be the last ones here, with only the cards to keep us company."

The lady smiled, still in high spirits. "I'm afraid I'm through for the night. Though I'm sure the cards will keep calling me back—I do love them so."

Cards probably weren't the *only* things that she loved, of course.

Balot politely bid the lady good night and turned her attention to the tables on her left hand.

The lady had lost well in excess of a hundred thousand dollars. As she had been destined to do from the start.

Balot wiped the lady's data from her hand in order to make way for information that would be more useful at this stage.

"Well, well. It looks like it's just us now. But we're still good to enjoy a game with you, right, Marlowe?" The Doctor spoke to the dealer as if he were an old friend, not someone he had just met for the first time a short while ago.

"Of course, sir. I wouldn't have it any other way." The dealer was as friendly as ever with his banter, but as he shuffled in preparation for the next round, he glanced at his wristwatch. *How long would he need to serve these two up on a plate?* Then he turned back to look at Balot and the Doctor. Oeufcoque would have picked up instantly on the look of deep greed—desire, even—that twinkled at the back of the dealer's eyes. Balot noticed it too.

Balot focused on sensing what the dealer was trying to do with the shuffle. His fingers were moving smoothly, *deliberately*, creating intricate patterns. Patterns that represented the dealer's will, as he manipulated the rules, stacking the odds in his favor. *This* must have been the intangible sense of unease that Balot had felt ever since sitting down at the table.

–I can feel it, Oeufcoque.

–Feel what?

–This dealer isn't just shuffling the cards.

–You mean he's manipulating their order?

–He's changing the way he shuffles them according to which customer he's targeting.

–I doubt that even he could memorize the entire contents of the card shoe, though.

–Maybe not. But he is at least thinking about the patterns of play, I'm sure of it.

–You think you know what the dealer's plan is?

–Pretty sure.

–Really?

Oeufcoque's reply came from within the glove. He seemed impressed—amazed, even. Balot nodded in confirmation, then realized that she had done so in reality, not just in her heart. Hurriedly she made a shaking movement with her head to cover it up, and it seemed that she succeeded. She continued her conversation with Oeufcoque, more carefully this time.

–Not in terms of exact facts and figures like you, of course. Just in a general sense.

–Enough to put it to use to your advantage?

–I just tried it out back then. I was right half the time. With a bit more practice, I think I'll get even better.

–Right, then. I'll do what I can with the numbers and the dealer's odor. You use your senses. We'll use our combined skills to ramp things up and move on to the next stage. Are you ready?

For a moment Balot thought she could hear Oeufcoque's growly laughter.

Laughter that suggested a hint of mischief—but laughter that she could *rely* on.

Balot nodded. Firmly inside her heart, this time.

The dealer had finished shuffling and had stacked the mountain of cards into a neat pile. He turned to Balot. For a second she had no idea what he wanted, and then it dawned on her: the red marker was held toward her, neatly, for her to take.

For the second time since taking her seat at the table, Balot received the transparent red card

for her to place in the deck as she pleased.

She focused her attention on the pile of cards and felt a certain *something* that seemed to emanate from one point. She slipped the marker right in at that exact place.

The dealer cut the cards one last time, smoothly as ever, then placed the cards in the card shoe. Balot felt the movement ever so keenly; it was as if she had set off a little ripple that could now spread out across the whole pattern, and more importantly, the dealer responded to that ripple—to its influence—when he cut the cards.

–We're taking our system through to the end, it looks like. Best tell the Doctor that we're moving into the final stage.

Balot squeezed back at the words as they emerged in her hand. *Affirmative.*

–Uncle, I have a feeling that I'm going to win big this time. My lucky streak is about to arrive, I'm sure of it.

"Dear, dear, and the game's hardly even begun…" The Doctor wrung his hands, skillful as ever in his portrayal of the part of the indulgent uncle who was now gently exasperated at his young charge's impatience. He looked like he was surrendering.

His eyes, though, told a different story as he caught Balot's own eyes for an instant. Then they went back behind the smokescreen.

"Well, then, we'll have to get serious! Let's see who can win the most—you or me!"

That was the cue for them both to bring their chips to the table.

The dealer smiled and checked their chips before dealing out the cards with the utmost care.

The game had begun. The game that Balot *was going to win*.

–I'm now going to display the true count.

The display on Balot's left hand transfigured again. Another level of detail had been added. More numbers, the fluctuations in the count. In terms of the quantity of displays, there was now actually slightly less to take in—the other players' data was no longer there—but the numbers that remained were now of another order of complexity, far beyond the computational power of the average person.

The point tally was no longer a simplistic one or two points at a time, either.

A 9 was now minus one, a 10 worth minus three and an ace minus four. The other numbers, too, were assigned values between plus and minus four. The resulting tally would then be used as a coefficient to other factors, namely the number of cards already played compared to the number left. The result of these calculations would in turn produce the ultimate optimized betting strategy.

In particular, the most important new development was that they were now keeping track of every single card that was played in the course of a round.

This was the one and only way to achieve their aim: absolute victory.

They would memorize all the cards that had appeared so that they could work out with mathematical certainty their odds of winning. Hence the true count.

There were six decks of cards in play in total, or 312 cards. Of those, thirty-odd would be excluded from a round because they would come below the red marker. The remaining 280 or so *could* be memorized, though, and if done properly the true count would be able to pinpoint the precise moment when the odds were most in Balot's favor—the moment to strike.

This was what Balot and the Doctor had been waiting for all along, and it was the reason they had been playing the waiting game.

–Sooner or later the moment will definitely come. The right moment to bet everything on a single hand. Until then you need to preserve your bankroll at all costs.

Balot squeezed her hand again—*roger that*.

She turned to the Doctor.

–Come on, Uncle! Your turn!

"Sure, sure…"

–No fair! Just because the other players have gone doesn't mean you can dawdle around and hold up the game, you know!

She knocked the Doctor's arm as if to hurry him along. Really, though, she was thinking that they'd managed that well. In order to win through card counting they needed to get through the earlier hands as quickly as possible in order to get to the good stuff. The Doctor's dallying was the perfect smokescreen—no one who was deliberately taking their time was likely to be a card counter.

The Doctor raised his head and hit. He drew a 3 on fifteen, total eighteen.

The Doctor called *stay*, and exhaled deeply, as if he'd struggled to make the decision.

Balot hit on sixteen. The dealer flipped her card over: 8.

The dealer's upcard was a 9. It wasn't the wrong decision for Balot to have hit—her move was tactically sound. It just didn't help her very much; the result was that she bust, plain and

simple. The cards and chips were collected, and Balot was about to take her eyes off them when Oeufcoque gave her an unusual instruction.

–Keep your eyes glued to your losing hand.

Balot did so, staring at the discard pile where her cards now rested.

The dealer turned his hidden card over: 9 and 8, which made seventeen—the Doctor won the hand.

–Try and make out that you're somehow winning.

–Even though I'm obviously not?

–Yes. As if you can't bear losing, so you're changing the rules in your own mind so that you're somehow winning.

Not the easiest request in the world, and Balot had to give some thought as to how she was going to do this. But then the Doctor fed her a lifeline, almost as if he had read her mind.

"There you are, you see? Less haste, more speed. Sometimes you *do* need to think about it in order to pull off a good win!"

–Whatever. My score was higher than yours, anyway.

"What are you talking about?"

–I had twenty-four. You only had eighteen, Uncle.

Balot had no idea how she'd come up with this or where she was going with it. Judging by their reactions, neither did the dealer, or indeed the Doctor.

"Erm…you do understand the rules, don't you, my dear? That's not *quite* how the game is played." The Doctor peered over at her, somewhat nonplussed.

–It's my money, I can play how I like!

Balot tried to sound as plausibly petulant as she could. The Doctor looked over at her indulgently, turning to the dealer as he dealt the cards. *I'll humor the child*, he seemed to say.

The dealer continued to deal, his expression as serious as ever.

Suddenly Balot felt somewhat embarrassed. Instinctively she turned to Oeufcoque to see if she had done something wrong.

–Was there a point to that?

–Of course.

–What, then?

–To manipulate the dealer.

–How?

–We show him just what a mysterious creature woman is.

That didn't really satisfy Balot—she still wanted to know *how*—but then it was her turn.

Balot hit on thirteen and bust. The card that should have helped her as a player was now sticking its oar in, getting in her way. *Don't rely on the cards to help you out, even the good ones.* The key to playing a steady game was never to hope for too much. Unless you expected fully to lose at any moment and could cultivate that sense of detachment, you were doomed to be led around by the nose. She had been taught this by the Doctor prematch, and she ruminated deeply on its meaning. Suddenly it came to her: was this what Oeufcoque wanted?

–I'm supposed to try and confuse him? The dealer?

–Exactly. I'll tell you when and how. Be as innocent as you can. Oeufcoque spoke as if he were casually ordering her to shoot him with a gun that she held in her hand.

Balot realized the enormity of what Oeufcoque was asking of her.

The cards came. A queen and 6, making sixteen. The dealer's upcard was a 10. The odds of winning at this point were severely stacked against her. The chips that she had placed—the chips she should have placed—were added to the tables on her hands, chalked up as additional losses. This was costing her dearly. But was she gaining something valuable in return?

Certainly Oeufcoque seemed to think so—he seemed totally unconcerned by what was actually on the cards. Indeed, he actually asked Balot:

–What sort of cards did you get?

Oeufcoque should have known this for himself, of course, but Balot *snarced* the full images of the cards directly to Oeufcoque, giving him an accurate facsimile of what she saw.

–I was actually asking for your impression of the cards, your gut reaction. Like what you wrote about the fossils in your personal dictionary.

Balot's mind went back to the time they were in the café together, way back before the trial.

–The pictures are pretty. I like the black queen. The six of diamonds seems like an accessory for her to wear.

–I want you to tell the Doctor what you've just told me.

–Is that all? Anything else?

–If you can think of anything else good to say then go for it, sure.

The Doctor hit, and though it was a close call he was still in the game. It was Balot's turn.

Balot nudged the Doctor.

–Hey, Uncle? Don't you think the picture on this card here is really cute?

The Doctor leaned over to inspect the queen in detail, almost as if Balot had drawn the picture on it herself. "I see what you're talking about. Just your sort of thing, isn't it?"

–It goes really well with the other card. I'm not sure I want to change it.

"I see. I think you're right."

–I thought so.

Then Oeufcoque cued her at exactly the right moment.

–Still—

–Still—I'd like to hit.

The dealer was completely unprepared for this. He hadn't spent years training for nothing, though, and he was ready with the next card, smooth as ever.

It was a 5. Her total was twenty-one. Was this the *something valuable* she was getting in return for her patience? The small card that was normally so advantageous to the house had now saved the player.

This was the pattern she had read—it was all coming together. But before she had time to react, Oeufcoque gave Balot her next instructions.

–Look at the pictures and show that you're unsatisfied with the card you've just been given. As if the drawings on the cards are all that matter.

Balot scowled conspicuously and pointed toward the new card as if it were an unwelcome interloper.

–What a shame! I didn't think this would happen, Uncle. The pictures are all out of whack—they don't match at all!

"Do you know what? I think you're right about what you said earlier about not changing the

pattern. You really do show talent as a budding artist."

–I like to think so, Uncle.

The two of them prattled on, a truly inane conversation. Pointless. But the dealer tried to find what meaning he could in it. He looked from one face to another, trying to break down the illusion.

Balot popped her head up.

–Stay.

Obviously. She hardly needed to say it, yet the dealer reacted as if he was momentarily surprised by Balot's decision. He nodded and flipped over his own card. A face card, value ten. His total was twenty. Balot had won.

The dealer paid out Balot's winnings, but she left them to one side, apparently uninterested—disappointed, even—in her victory. In fact she had won twice over: once because of the hand and again because she had successfully thrown the dealer off balance. But she kept this all to herself.

From this point onward Balot said whatever came to her mind as the cards were dealt, anything to put the dealer off the scent—and draw him further in at the same time.

Balot said,

–The cards are like a flock of birds in flight. I want to help them fly away to freedom.

Balot said,

–The cards seem a little jagged at the corners. I hope I'll be able to smooth out their rough edges a bit.

Balot said,

–They seem a little soft—but maybe they're exactly right just as they are.

And then, ***–Still, I'm going to hit***. And then, ***–Because of that, I should stay, I think***. And then, ***–Even so, I'd like to hit, please***.

Balot could hardly work out whether she was coming or going herself. Let alone the dealer.

The Doctor supported her act as best he could, occasionally turning to the dealer with a face that said *I've no idea what she's going on about either, but let's humor her.*

–The dealer's doing a pretty good job of keeping his cool so far, but even he won't be able to keep it up much longer.

Oeufcoque seemed mildly amused by his own mischief. He brought up the true count on Balot's hand, thoroughly and accurately.

–He thinks he has you worked out—what sort of personality you are. He has you down as a proper little spoiled princess, someone who doesn't even have to ask before she gets. So he's working out how to give it to you—his head's full of just how he's going to do that.

Balot shrugged her shoulders. She started to appreciate just how powerful a force misdirection was.

Basically, this dealer was exceedingly proud of the fact that he could read any customer like a book—or so he thought.

In other words, the dealer knew that however irrationally the customer seemed to be acting, there was always a reason behind their behavior, whether it was conscious or subconscious.

Despite his brave face, though, all the dealer had to go on at this point was the fact that Balot had suddenly gone from being more or less mute to a real chatterbox. Balot could feel his breathing rhythms start to sway, and even if Oeufcoque hadn't been there to guide her she would have been able to work out exactly when to interject, to prod him, for maximum effect, throwing

him further and further off his guard without his even realizing it.

–Looks like clubs are my lucky suit. They're always there for me when I need them the most.

The Doctor nodded in agreement, showing he was in full sympathy with his "niece's" line of thinking. "Oh, yes, it's most important to discover your special suit. It's a well-known fact that a particular suit can act as a mirror for your soul."

At this point Balot had no clubs in her hand. Only the dealer's upcard was a club.

Balot was presumably going to sit tight and wait, hoping for the dealer to bust. But no. The second after the Doctor said he would stay,

–Hit.

Balot didn't even leave a hair's breadth before calling out her move. The dealer's reaction was delayed again. As if he were doing everything he could to force himself not to ask her to repeat herself because he hadn't caught it the first time.

The card came. A 6 on top of her thirteen. The suit was diamonds.

The dealer was staring intently at Balot, trying to work out what was going through her mind.

–Just as I thought, Uncle!

That was all she had to say.

The Doctor didn't even seem to be paying attention to Balot's cards at this point; he was, by all appearances, focused intently on his own game. As a result of this further misdirection, the dealer had even less to go on.

Now Balot would take plenty of time to mull over her next hand before choosing to stay, and the dealer would flip over his hidden card with relief, as if he had finally been permitted his turn. Both his hidden card and his upcard were face cards, and the dealer won that hand. Furthermore, both his cards were clubs.

"So close, madamoiselle, my commiserations."

–Oh, not to worry. **My** ***suit just took a little wander over your way, that's all. They'll be back in my hand before long, and in greater numbers too.***

Sure enough, that was exactly what happened in the next hand. Not that Balot had any way of planning it exactly like that, of course, but when the 2 of clubs appeared in her hand along with the ace of spades, Balot smiled as if to show her theory had been proven right. The dealer nodded in surprise but then seemed to accept her theory that clubs were just "her" suit, and appeared to relax a little. Balot decided to throw him off the scent further. She didn't even have to wait for an instruction from Oeufcoque.

–Then again, looking at this hand it seems that it's spades that are coming to my rescue.

Balot said this out loud, deliberately, as the Doctor hesitated over his choice. Then, when it *was* her turn,

–Sorry to mess you around, clubs, but I think I'm going to have to hit after all.

She drew a face card—clubs.

–As I thought—you did come to my rescue, after all.

She hit again, still speaking apparently to herself. This time she received a 5. Hearts.

–Ah, finally! Thanks for dropping by.

Still prattling inanely to herself, she chose to stay.

–I've always bet on hearts, all along, but I think that this heart is particularly worth

betting on.

"Well, there's a stroke of luck for you," said the Doctor, ever the Doctor, as he stared intently at the dealer's upcard.

The dealer had a 5 and 7. He drew a picture card and bust.

"You know, you're exceptionally gifted at predicting the cards. Your uncle never would have guessed that one, you know," continued the Doctor.

–Yeah. The spade seemed to want to stick his oar in, but the heart went well with the club, so I thought it was worth betting on them to see if it would work out.

"Hmm, I see. You're having a conversation with the cards, you could say? Talking to them?"

The dealer handed over her winnings with an expression that seemed to suggest that he'd rather Balot kept her conversation for people and let the cards sort themselves out.

The game progressed along similar lines for another few hands, and then Balot had a jack and 10 appear in front of her.

Balot now put on a triumphant air, pointing at her cards.

–I was waiting for these! See! I knew my clubs would come crawling back to me before too long. A little too late, though, don't you think, Uncle? I don't really need them anymore.

The Doctor just nodded, somewhat carelessly.

Balot was the only one to win that hand.

She received her winnings but pushed them over to one side, apparently uninterested by the chips—bored by them, almost.

She could almost hear the dealer's state of confusion cranking up a notch.

At this point the dealer should really have given up on trying to read Balot, taken stock, and just continued with a level head; he still had the house edge on his side, after all, and it wasn't as if the house had started losing heavily yet. It wasn't even his own money that he was losing. But the dealer was determined to crack Balot, to work out what she was thinking. His smile remained, but it was growing more and more strained.

–Does this person still want to bankrupt me, Oeufcoque?

–It seems so. Of course, all that's really happening is that he's losing the plot.

–Why is he even that bothered? It's just a job for him, isn't it?

–That's the sort of person he is, no doubt. He needs to be in control. Trouble is, the dealer doesn't really have any direct influence over his own game. Take away the natural advantage that he has by playing to the rules and the dealer's not much more than a bystander, after all.

–I see that.

–The trouble is, there are some dealers who try and use that natural advantage as a shield, stepping out of line and going over and above the call of duty to try and get more. This dealer is a perfect example of that: he's cold, calculating, and very, very good at parting punters from their money. The corollary of this is that he needs to be in control at all times—he's the dominating type. And that's something that we can use to our own advantage in so many ways.

It wasn't long before the Doctor picked up on the turn of events and pitched in wholeheartedly to their strategy of befuddling the dealer. He nodded along at Balot's impenetrable statements and threw back a few of his own for good measure.

"I must say, I'm most impressed, O niece of mine. It seems like I've created a monster!" The Doctor praised her conspicuously and lavishly, virtually forcing the dealer to follow suit. The

dealer wasn't quite sure *what* he was supposed to be praising, of course. Before long he found himself talking in the most abstract of terms: *most impressive, wonderful, how perceptive of madamoiselle.*

The game reached its middle stages, and another instruction came from Oeufcoque.

–Try changing your posture now. When the next hand comes, cross your legs.

Balot did as she was told, crossing her legs as soon as her second card was on the table.

The dealer shouldn't really have been able to see under the table, of course, but nevertheless he seemed intently focused on her actions.

–Right, now for the next few hands, try shifting your position constantly—from left to right, as if you're trying to see the cards out of the corner of your eye.

The Doctor hit and received his card. His total was now seventeen, and he stayed. During this, Balot shifted her body so that her back was half turned to the Doctor.

It became her turn, and she hit on fourteen to take her up to eighteen.

Instead of responding immediately, she crossed her legs again, looked at the cards from the left corner of her field of vision, and declared her intention to stay.

The dealer couldn't take his eyes off Balot—they were still glued to her as he flipped his own hidden card over.

The dealer had two 9s—total eighteen. A draw with Balot; the Doctor was defeated.

Balot asked Oeufcoque a question as the cards on the table were collected.

–What are we trying to do now?

–Humans have a natural tendency to order things in their mind, to put things into neat boxes so that they can better understand them. We need to make sure that the visual cues we give off are consistent with that—in other words, we need to look as we're supposed to be feeling.

–I don't understand at all…

–For example, when you're thinking about something you really like, your eyes look to your left. When there's something you don't like the idea of, your eyes shift to your far right. When you think about something you admire, they fix on a point in the distance somewhat to the left. Oh, there are plenty of individual variations on the theme, of course, but statistically speaking most people tend to have the same "tells"—there's a fixed pattern. Those who are skilled manipulators can train themselves to be able to read people by just their eyes and body language, working out their opponent's thoughts and feelings without them even saying a word.

–This dealer is* checking me out*?

–Of course—it's one of the basic principles of psychological manipulation. As I said, not just eye movements but also the positioning of your hands and feet, the way your face is turned, the slope of your shoulders: all these are supposed to be a map, a diagram to someone's current psychological state.

Balot looked at her cards and couldn't help but *feel* a scowl, even if she didn't show it. Had the dealer really been watching her so all along? Like a Peeping Tom? It wasn't a nice feeling.

Determined to destroy the picture that the dealer had so assiduously drawn, Balot now shifted this way and that. Then sometimes she would confuse him further by refusing to respond at all to the cards, keeping her posture frozen. It didn't take much. The dealer, who had been ruling the roost at his table, manipulating the players every which way, was now dancing to Balot's tune—and he didn't even realize it.

She would smile aimlessly, apropos of nothing, and the dealer would be forced to smile back. Then she would go all grumpy, causing the dealer to turn serious, wondering what the matter could be. Before long, Balot was sure that if she asked him to jump, his only response would be "How high?"

–I think the time is now ripe to enlist the Doctor to our cause.

As Oeufcoque spoke, Balot noticed that a new strategy chart appeared on her left hand—the Doctor's moves.

Balot waited for the Doctor to bust, then offered to help.

–Looks like I'm better than you at predicting the cards, Uncle. I'll give you some tips on what you need to do to win.

The Doctor raised a finger and wagged it from side to side, as if to say his pride wouldn't permit him to take advice from a girl. "Don't you worry about me. It might look like I'm losing at the moment, but you never know when my luck might start to turn."

Balot smiled, but under the table she nudged the Doctor softly with her tiptoe. The Doctor nudged her back. Confirmation. He'd understood the plan. However many sensors there may have been overhead, none of them would have been able to see under the table, surely? There wasn't any watching the customer down there. Not usually.

Starting from the very next hand, Balot fed Oeufcoque's instructions to the Doctor under the table.

First, one tap on the side of the Doctor's foot. The signal to hit. The Doctor *hmmed*.

Then the dealer brushed against his earpiece and whispered a few words into the built-in microphone.

Balot intercepted the electronic transmission in order to eavesdrop on it, a reflex reaction now. She *snarced* the electronic waves, turning them to sound waves inside her head.

Balot was stunned by the message. It was a transmission to the observation room. Asking them to check the cameras. To check if she was somehow giving the Doctor a signal.

She sensed the piercing gaze of the dealer bearing down on her face like the muzzle of a gun. She was about to turn and meet his gaze when Oeufcoque stopped her.

–Don't look at the dealer. It's just a trick to try and catch out people with guilty consciences. To smoke them out of their den. Stay still. You're not doing anything illegal.

Yes—this *was* an accomplished dealer, and they couldn't overlook that fact, even when he was starting to fall under their spell. All it took was his intuition—a sixth sense, almost—to work out that something underhanded was going on. Still, it was as Oeufcoque said: as long as they weren't caught in the act, there was nothing the casino could pin on them, however suspicious they were. There were limits to the dealer's abilities. And there was no way for the casino to tell for sure whether the pair at the table were indeed sitting ducks, or whether they were a ticking time bomb, biding their time before going off with an almighty bang, leaving only a huge bill in their wake.

Balot stuck to the important hands, giving the Doctor his signal as subtly as she could. Two nudges of the foot to stay, one to hit. Three when he had to double down. On the rare occasions he was supposed to split, Balot was to tug on his sleeve as if to hurry him up.

The dealer seemed to be picking up on many of these signals, or so she thought, but then he appeared to lose interest, as if he had been worrying over nothing. Balot's efforts at misdirection had obviously paid off.

Suddenly it occurred to Balot to inject a bit of life into the proceedings. She wanted to revive

the sitcom atmosphere of earlier, get her double act with the Doctor back on the road. She prodded his arm playfully.

–I've got it, Uncle! I've worked out a foolproof plan to win.

The Doctor's eyes opened wide in surprise. The dealer, caught up in the moment, did the same.

"What sort of plan?" asked the Doctor.

–Before I go into that, I want to change some of my chips.

"Well, it's not me you should be asking, then, is it? Ask Mr. Handsome over there on the other side of the table."

Balot nodded and turned to the dealer to offer him a single thousand-dollar chip.

–I'd like to change this into a thousand one-dollar chips, please.

Time stood still as the dealer and the Doctor turned to stare at Balot.

–That way, I'll be able to make a thousand bets with just this single chip!

The Doctor was the first to break the silence. "Where's the fun in that?"

Balot puffed her cheeks out in a sulk. It was a convincing act, if she did think so herself. She was sure that this was one of the skills that she had picked up since she first met Oeufcoque.

"Look, gambling is fun precisely *because* there's an element of risk. It's a nice idea you're suggesting, but it's kind of missing the whole point of what a casino is about. Please—if you want to play a game, let's think up one that involves trying to win as much as we can, not one that just involves trying to survive as long as we can…"

–Okay, okay. I'll just win lots, then.

The Doctor was visibly relieved. He turned to the dealer to give him an apologetic look that said, *Sorry about this, it's her first time, and you know what young girls are like…*

The dealer managed to pull himself together long enough to flash the Doctor a brief, sympathetic smile. But his confusion remained, more palpable than ever.

Surely at this point the usual thing for her to do would be to throw caution to the wind and start betting big? And yet she was talking about whittling her stake down to a feeble dollar-a-pop! The dealer's face started to show all this—and the fact that he just couldn't work out what Balot was thinking.

She seemed indifferent when she was winning but got excited when she was losing. She got emotionally attached to cards—all gooey and sentimental—whether she won *or* lost, and it was impossible to tell what she was being sentimental *about*. Her conversation was all over the place, but somehow she managed to come up with all sorts of nonsensical rules and fun and games with her uncle.

Worst of all, though, *she was winning*—not in a big way, he didn't think, but steadily, ominously. In all his career, he had yet to come across a customer quite so baffling and inexplicable.

The point tally displayed by Oeufcoque showed that the odds at this point were now overwhelmingly in the players' favor, but just as Balot was about to press home her advantage, the red marker appeared. The round was brought to an end just before things started to get *really* interesting.

Balot took a deep breath and checked the statistics for the round. The percentages were comprehensively in their favor: averaged with the Doctor, the two of them had managed to win at a rate of well over 60 percent. Or to put it in simple terms, an initial stake of ten dollars would be,

on average, increased to seventy dollars within ten hands. As far as winning streaks went, this was overwhelming.

–It's all going to hinge on this next round. Use the shuffle to convert all your chips into ten-thousand-dollar pieces.

Oeufcoque ordered, and Balot followed. The result was an intimidatingly tall stack of high-value chips, right in front of her.

The dealer touched his earphone again to order replacement chips for the ones he had paid out. The manager replied, and the dealer quickly cut him off in a low voice. *I'll get them all back, and more.* Balot intercepted the whole exchange.

Balot shrugged her shoulders. She felt exceedingly calm.

The dealer started his shuffle and Balot scrutinized his movements.

She could sense the intention behind his movements more clearly than ever. It was as though he were no longer concerned with keeping up appearances. As a result Balot could read the complex patterns of the cards as they flowed left and right—they shone like neon cafeteria signs in the night.

–He's trying to manipulate the shuffle so as to force the high-value cards toward the bottom of the stack, out of our reach.

Oeufcoque understood immediately.

–Can you tell how many he's trying to take out of play?

–As many as he can. He's trying to make sure all the tens—including the royals—end up at the bottom of the shoe.

–In that case, we consider those cards discarded from play. Try and get as accurate a reading as you can for me so that I can adjust the count accordingly.

–Okay.

The dealer's fingertips moved smoothly and with great accuracy. Ironically, his very skill made it all the easier for Balot to read his movements.

The Doctor was given the red marker, and he shoved it into the pile of cards haphazardly. The dealer performed another cut—a stealthy, swift movement, one much too quick for the naked eye to follow. And indeed Balot didn't follow it, not with her eyes at least. But the Lightite skin that covered her entire body was sensitive enough to the sudden movement, and she read it like a book.

–Thirty-two cards in total. Every single one of them worth ten.

–So he's taken two decks' worth of tens and royals and removed them from play. What a move…

Oeufcoque seemed simultaneously impressed and blasé.

The point tally changed, dropping immediately to minus eighty. The value of the optimal stake per hand also plummeted accordingly. It was time to batten down the hatches and play defensively.

The first cards came. A 6 and 3. Small cards. Balot tried to bring to mind the sensation of what had happened when the dealer last cut the cards. Remembering, *feeling* which cards surrounded the clumps of ten cards before they were stealthily removed.

She looked over to the Doctor to see he had a 2 and 5. He hit twice, eventually settling on a total of seventeen, at which point he stayed. Balot also hit twice, bringing her total to nineteen.

The dealer's upcard was a 6. The hidden card was a 2. He drew three cards, bringing his total to nineteen, meaning the Doctor lost and Balot drew, and her chips returned to her.

The next hand saw Balot with a total of twelve, and she hit. She received a 5. When would her luck change? It was all about trying to pin down the precise moment.

Balot stared at her cards, then made her mind up.

According to Oeufcoque's tactics the right move was to stay. Yet Balot chose to hit. She received a 6. Bust. But this was no longer about the hand. There was a bigger picture.

The dealer quickly collected Balot's spent cards. As he did so, Balot intuitively grasped the thickness of the pile of remaining cards and chose her moment carefully.

She promptly reconfirmed her bankroll, then plucked out a handful of chips as if she were wrenching them from the mountainous pile. Then she waited.

The dealer revealed his cards. He had eleven and drew a 7 to bring his total up to eighteen.

As a result the Doctor lost, and the dealer collected the Doctor's cards too.

Balot placed her chips on the table as the dealer made his move. The clink of the chips as they landed on the table distracted the dealer for a moment, causing him to take his eyes from the discard pile. He looked somewhat stunned.

Balot ignored the dealer and turned to the Doctor.

–I have to use them up, really, it's not fair to the chips otherwise.

The Doctor grunted and appeared to be thinking deeply, but then he announced, "Very well, then. Bring it on!" Throwing caution to the wind he placed a pile of ten-thousand-dollar chips on the table in front of him.

Up until this moment Balot and the Doctor had both been extremely cautious with their opening bets.

This was the correct tactic when counting, after all. The true count was zero at the start of a new round, so it was only prudent to start the betting low and increase their stakes only when the cards started to play in their favor. Balot and the Doctor had been doing their best to cover up the fact that they were doing just that, but even so the dealer would have surely worked out by now that they always started each new game cautiously, even if he didn't suspect that the tactic was part of their card counting.

The dealer may have worked us out, thought Balot, *but we have him worked out even better.*

The dealer seemed in better spirits as he put his hand to the card shoe.

First the dealer's upcard appeared. An 8.

Then the Doctor's first card. A 10. Then Balot received her card. Also a 10. Then the dealer's hidden card was dealt. Then the Doctor's second card. Another 10. Balot's second card came. Again, a 10.

There were four tens on the table in front of them now. Balot tapped the Doctor's arm—*twice*.

–You'll never beat me unless you stop being so stingy with your chips.

The Doctor put on a troubled face before eventually coming to a decision. Not hitting, not staying, but rather *the third option*.

"Split."

The Doctor used his two index fingers to signal his cards being pulled apart.

Then he placed another pile of chips, equal to his original stake, on the table, beside the card that no longer had a stake covering it.

The dealer drew and placed a third card next to one of the Doctor's. Incredibly, this card too was a 10.

"Stay."

The Doctor was dealt yet another card. Yet again another 10.

–Look, you can go again if you want, Uncle! If you have the guts, that is…

Balot tapped the Doctor's arm again.

"Of course…" said the Doctor, and the dealer's face showed a flash of panic when he saw the Doctor take yet another pile of chips in his hands. "Split."

Another 10.

The Doctor peered at the dealer's upcard and hummed, "I think I'd better stay this time."

In response the dealer now moved on to the second of the Doctor's two original cards and dealt again. Another 10.

"Split," the Doctor called again, and again he thrust forward more chips. The dealer was breathing heavily now and seemed to be in some pain. Still, he managed to deal another card to the Doctor. A 10 again. The Doctor stayed. Then another card, for the last split, and yet another 10.

"Stay, I think…" the Doctor said casually. Then he turned to Balot and laughed broadly. "Well, I've had a good enough run for my money, don't you think? Now let's see if you can do any better."

–I'll split too.

The dealer's face was now drained of all expression, and he was staring at the pile of chips that Balot was preparing to add to the table.

Her card came. It was another 10. The dealer had done his best to contain them, but he couldn't get them all, and here was the surplus, spilling out uncontrollably, just where he didn't want them —like the clubs in poker that nobody seemed to want. Like stray dollar bills sticking out the sides of a hastily closed trunk.

–Stay.

For a moment the dealer seemed relieved. But then Balot's other card received a 10 to go with it.

Balot re-split, received another 10, and stayed. Her second re-split card also received another 10, and she re-split again. And so on and so on. It was only when she came to the sixth split that she drew a 7 and finally stopped.

The dealer looked like a bank robber hemmed in by police on all sides. Police with advance notice of when the break-in was due to take place. The dealer's shaking hand moved toward his own cards now, slowly turning over his hidden card, well aware that it was the pin to a hand grenade that was about to blow up in his face.

The dealer's hidden card was a 10. Bringing the total number of tens on the table up to twenty.

The dealer's total was eighteen. Of the ten bullets that Balot and the Doctor fired toward him, one missed and the other nine landed with deadly accuracy. The dealer was at death's door.

–The prize is within our grasp now.

Oeufcoque's words floated up on Balot's hand as if he were giving her his blessing. Balot was truly thankful to have Oeufcoque silently watching over her.

–All we need now is a couple more good chances and you should be able to pin it down.

By "it," Oeufcoque of course meant the thing that they had come to this casino for. *The four million-dollar chips*. The Doctor's instructions came to mind again—they must steal the yolk without touching the white or the shell.

The payout came. Between them Balot and the Doctor were looking at over half a million dollars. The plump lady might have lost big to the house, but in one fell swoop Balot and the Doctor had won almost five times as much from the casino.

–See, it's like I said. Stop being stingy with your chips, and they stop being stingy to you!

Balot grinned cheekily, as if to say that this was only natural.

–But it's going to be a little tricky now, isn't it, Uncle? With all these chips cluttering up the table, I mean.

"Fine, well, once we manage to win a bit more we can exchange our chips for larger

denominations."

–Okay, Uncle! We'll just have to win some more then!

"Sure. I think that if we could double what we have now then that ought to do it."

That bizarre conversation out of the way, Balot gave a convincing show of bracing herself for the next set of cards. Likewise the Doctor.

The dealer stared at the pair of them in shock, as if they had each just grown a pair of wings.

–Now we need to make sure this dealer stays put at this table.

Instructions from Oeufcoque flashed up.

–We need to convince the house that we're a useful *set of customers, ready to be milked for all we're worth. Otherwise they might switch dealers on us or even ask us to leave the casino.*

At this point Balot noticed that the dealer was listening to instructions being sent to him through his earpiece. It seemed that the dealer had asked an attendant for more chips, and that the attendant reported this back to the floor manager. The dealer was being subjected to a lecture from an authoritative-sounding voice.

The floor manager's analysis was that the pair at the table were probably ordinary punters, high rollers who had somehow slipped through the net of the casino's usually comprehensive VIP screening. But until their identities could be confirmed for sure, the dealer's orders were to try and *contain* them. Keep the bets as low as possible, set a house maximum limit, and distract them with prizes and trinkets—free-stay coupons at the hotel, first-class plane tickets, and whatnot. Balot, though, had no intention of being *contained* by such things. She had to come up with a plan. She thought about what her opponent wanted. How she could act as if she were about to fulfil their *needs*.

–Hey, Uncle? Why don't we play a different sort of game now? First to use up all their chips?

Balot gave her best impression of a spoiled brat who always got her way, however capricious.

"Come again?"

–A battle between me and you. First to get rid of all their chips wins.

The Doctor was visibly stunned. As was the dealer. "That's not, er, what this game is really *about*, you know? Or rather, I should say that's not how you play at a casino…" said the Doctor.

–What about lowball poker, then? When the weakest hand is the winner?

"Well, sure, but even then, the aim is still to *win* the chips…"

–But it's so boring right now!

"Well, then, if you insist, why don't we go for something like a high-low split? First to either reach the target *or* get rid of all their chips wins? If you manage to beat me I'll buy you whatever you want on the way home."

–You're on, Uncle! I'm going to thrash you!

The conversation had taken such a strange turn that the dealer had to struggle to keep up. But at least one thing was clear.

"We've got a pair of easy marks here, sir. Sitting ducks," the dealer whispered into his earpiece in a voice that was inaudible to Balot and the Doctor—or rather, *would have been inaudible* if not for Balot's powers. Balot understood that she and the Doctor were angels, the answer to all the dealer's prayers, for he would be able to get what he wanted from them—*his marks*. Balot felt the last twinges of pity for this man disappear. If he saw her as no more than a

pigeon to be plucked, she'd deliver the same back to him, with interest.

–Well played.

Oeufcoque's words floated up on her hand, and she squeezed back at them as she placed her chips for the next hand. The Doctor placed his chips too. The dealer never did get around to setting that house maximum; he was trapped in a quagmire of his own making.

–This dealer already has one foot in the grave as far as this casino is concerned.

Oeufcoque was providing a commentary now.

–Not only that, it's the foot in the grave bearing his weight at the moment. This dealer is no longer acting like an employee should. He's taking this personally. *He's forgotten all his responsibilities and duties as an employee.*

Indeed, the man in front of Balot, Marlowe John Fever, now had eyes for one thing and one thing only: to bring down Balot and the Doctor, even if it took all the chips in the casino to do it.

–Right, we're going to divide our strategy into three parts.

Oeufcoque had the measure of the dealer now and dictated a new course of play. The bankroll was divided into three piles. The tactical grid on Balot's left hand split into three distinct tables, each showing their own sets of figures.

–We'll make tactical adjustments on a hand-by-hand basis.

The idea was to divide Balot's chips into three piles and to treat each pile as if it belonged to a different player. The first would be the sacrificial victim to pave the way for the other two. The second would perform a supporting task, gradually building up something of a bankroll. The third was there to deal the knockout blow when the time was *just* right.

Balot also had to signal the Doctor's moves too, so there were four lines of tactics in play at any given time.

Balot had her hands full. It was true that her newly expanded bankroll gave her some breathing space, but the sort of tactics she was now attempting were far beyond the reach of a normal human being. It was only because Oeufcoque was with her that she'd be able to perform the sort of complex calculations that were needed to pull it off—all without the dealer being able to see through her plan.

The game progressed, Balot winning steadily all the while. Just as they entered the final stages Oeufcoque gave another instruction.

–Time to give the dealer a bit of a jolt, I think. We can't have him get too coolheaded.

For this was indeed what had been happening as the game had started to calm down again.

–What should I do?

The answer to Balot's question was a tough one to swallow.

–You really think I should say something like that?

–I do. The time is ripe.

Having received her orders, Balot gauged her timing, and when the moment was right she tapped the Doctor's arm.

"What is it?"

Balot left the slightest of pauses before unleashing the words that cut like a knife:

–I want to play at another table.

The Doctor's mouth flew open. But if *he* was surprised, the dealer looked as if he'd seen a ghost—no, as if his whole world were about to collapse around him. This girl, this girl who knew *nothing*, was *rejecting* her own table? When she was on such a winning streak?

The Doctor protested, as if he were interceding for the dealer. "How come? You're doing so well here! It's time to press our advantage! Wasn't it you yourself who said that we needed to be in it to win it?"

The Doctor, of course, understood Balot's game perfectly. She had been worried for a moment that he might actually take her literally, thinking she was flaking, and that the Doctor really might get up to leave the table as she suggested. But he showed no sign of moving.

–Fine, be like that. I'll just win some more chips at this table, then.

The dealer almost choked at the way Balot phrased this—*so resentful!*

The red marker appeared during the next hand. The dealer went bust, and the round was over.

The dealer hastily collected the cards. No longer could his hand movements be described as slick and smooth—his actions were those of a man scrambling to load a revolver. *This is what I'm going to use to kill them,* his fingertips seemed to say. Balot focused her attention on those fingertips.

While she did this, the Doctor engaged the dealer in conversation, playing the part of a punter eager to fill the time before the action could recommence.

And the manner in which the Doctor addressed him—"Marlowe" or even "Buddy," he called the man, treating him as an equal, like a long-lost friend.

Just as he has ever since he sat down at the table, come to think of it.

Something clicked—and Balot realized exactly why the Doctor was doing this, why the Doctor had planned it from the start. It was to treat the dealer as an individual, to distinguish him from the casino. To strip away the dealer's attachments, his sense of duty and responsibility toward his employers.

The shuffle was over soon enough, and the dealer handed the red marker to Balot.

Balot sensed the pile of cards and thrust the red marker toward the blind spot—the place that would cause the cards to flow with maximum advantage to the players and maximum disadvantage to the dealer. She did this without the dealer realizing what she was doing.

Balot placed the red marker *on* the pile of cards. Just like that. Not *in* them, *on top* of them. It was almost as if she were mocking the dealer, making fun of the whole process. In reality though, there was more to her actions than mere mockery.

The dealer's hands wavered in midair. He did his best to pull the situation back, to proceed on to the cut as smoothly as possible. His actions may have looked convincing enough to the casual bystander, but in fact he missed his target spectacularly—by a wide margin. It was as if the gun that he had so carefully prepared and loaded—the weapon he had to protect him—had now fallen into enemy hands and was being turned against him.

–That was your judgment call, was it?

–Yup.

–You said the dealer was manipulating the order of the cards—this is related to that, is it?

–I just thought it was the best place for the marker. It's made a lot of the smaller cards end up at the end of the pile.

–How many?

–Thirty cards. All sevens or lower.

Balot thought she felt Oeufcoque grinning inside her gloves.

–Very good. Now, let's give our dealer friend another little jolt like before.

–What do you want me to say this time?

She was almost afraid to ask. And indeed Oeufcoque's answer was that she should deliver a veritable death blow. His aim was so true. Ruthless.

–Who are you and what have you done with Oeufcoque?

–What have I done with…

–Oeufcoque. Half-baked, wishy-washy. That's what you're supposed to be, it's what your name means, isn't it? And yet here you are!

–Hmph, you mean I'm going too far *instead of* not far enough *for once? Maybe you're right. But needs must—this is a case where the ends justify the means.*

The mouse doth protest too much, Balot thought to herself.

She giggled inside, then squeezed her glove to show that it was okay, she was with him. Then she did as he had suggested.

–Hey, Uncle?

She waited until the dealer was just about to finish exhaling and was at his most defenseless before continuing with her killer blow.

–I'm bored here. Won't you take me someplace where there are some nice men around?

She was no longer rejecting the *place*. This was a *personal* rejection: *she found the dealer unappealing*. The dealer's expression didn't change. Instead, he stopped breathing. As if he'd had his breath sucked out of him. Indeed, for all practical intents and purposes Marlowe *was* now dead as a dealer; no longer was he the invincible master of the gaming table. He was a private individual, and a snubbed one at that.

The Doctor tried awkwardly to persuade Balot to stay. "Let's just try and enjoy the game, no? Look, you *are* winning, after all. If you give up now you're turning your back on the rainbow that could lead to the pot of gold."

Then he turned to the dealer and shrugged apologetically.

It was the dealer's turn to speak. "I do apologize most sincerely for any way in which you find me *lacking*, my lady…" It was a small miracle that he could still muster up the self-restraint necessary to maintain his composure and keep smiling.

Then the dealer removed his earpiece with his hand and crushed it beneath the table. He was out of radio contact with the rest of the casino. But Balot had managed to catch the last transmission that the dealer had received.

It was from the floor manager, a frantic order to let another dealer take his place.

≡

Outwardly calm but seething with rage and shame on the inside, the dealer was now losing hand over fist without even noticing that he was doing so.

–Just as well that he's usually such an accomplished dealer. The casino really is on the defensive—they don't know how to play this one.

Oeufcoque too had noticed that the dealer had rid himself of his earpiece.

Despite this fact, and somewhat surprisingly, the casino had yet to send along a replacement.

–They must be finding it hard to decide whether this dealer has lost the plot or whether he

still might be able to pull it back for them. They should have checked us out by now.

–Do they still think we're suckers? Easy marks who just happen to be on a lucky streak?

–They must. The one person in the whole casino who should be able to identify us accurately is Shell-Septinos. He's supposed to be the owner here…

Balot shrugged inwardly.

–He's probably forgotten all about us, right? With that operation that sucks out his memories…

–It doesn't suck them out*, exactly…*

Oeufcoque chuckled grimly.

–According to our sources, he's preoccupied with this transaction he's trying to set up. This really is our chance right now.

–Transaction? You mean his marriage?

–Exactly. Or rather the de facto *promotion that he gets by marrying into the family of the house he works for. If we can pull the rug from under his feet then we may be able to bring his bosses down too—they're the real target, after all.*

Bring them down and send them to hell—that was what Oeufcoque wanted to say, but he just managed to restrain himself.

It would have been easy enough to simply batter the enemy into submission, after all. They had the means right in front of them. But it was more complicated than that, however thrilling the prospect was of seeing the enemy squirm.

To be *burnt out*. It *meant* something. To *know*. It wasn't so much the question of *good versus evil* that concerned Oeufcoque and the Doctor—it was the question of *innocence and experience.* What you could learn from seeing the world, with all its wonders and horrors reflected back at you. Could Balot learn, could she *respond*? If not then Oeufcoque wouldn't have gone out of his way to help her as he did.

Balot sat there silently, waiting for her moment. The point tally was rising steadily. She was winning at a rate of over 60 percent of the hands, and this winning streak showed no sign of abating. The nines in the pile of cards had all been used up, and the number of cards worth seven or below had been depleted massively. The ratio of tens to other cards changed massively, and then suddenly there was a run of aces, appearing like a sudden gold rush and then disappearing again, a flash in the pan.

The cards were plunging toward an inevitable equilibrium. Balot maintained her calm breathing, but inside her heart was pounding.

Then there was a succession of small cards—the calm before the squall. The moment had arrived.

–This is it. Time to go all-in.

Balot took her cue from Oeufcoque and placed her hands on the pile that she had been keeping safe. One of the three piles she had created from her bankroll. Her troops that she had held in reserve, ready to be deployed in the moment of certain victory.

It wasn't a huge pile in physical terms, as the individual chips were all of high denominations. But when the dealer clocked just how much was now at stake, his hand that had been resting on the card shoe jolted as if he had been struck by lightning.

–Might as well use them up…

Balot spoke to the Doctor, but it was the dealer she was watching.

"Very good. I accept your challenge, O niece of mine!" The Doctor responded as if he were calling a raise in poker and piled his chips onto the table to follow suit.

And then there was half a million dollars' worth of chips in front of Balot, with the Doctor not too far behind, with a stake of roughly three hundred thousand dollars.

Passersby couldn't help but stop in their tracks when they saw the extraordinary sums that were now at stake. They whispered among themselves. The dealer somehow managed to drag his hand back to the card shoe and force out a smile for the benefit of Balot and the Doctor.

The atmosphere around the table had certainly taken a strange turn.

The cards arrived. An 8. That was to say, the majority of the cards now on the table were eights.

The Doctor had an 8 and an 8, a total of sixteen. Balot had an 8 and a 7, total fifteen.

The dealer's upcard was also an 8.

"Stay," said the Doctor.

–Stay.

The dealer gulped and turned over his hidden card.

It was a 7. He drew again: 8. Then the red marker appeared.

The red card that represented absolute, perfect victory for Balot and the Doctor.

The dealer froze, while the spectators seemed to boil over with excitement.

Some of them understood the significance of the sequence of cards that had just passed. *The magic of sevens and eights*. When the remaining cards were a couple of sevens and at least four eights, the dealer was doomed by the rules to lose, no matter what.

All the players had to do in this situation was stay. Whether the dealer had fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen, he'd have to draw and would end up busting.

Such was the power of percentages. The rules that had been so meticulously crafted to give the house its edge; this was the one moment when they were turned upside down, guaranteeing the house certain defeat. It was a gun fired at point-blank range: absolute.

–Hmm, I don't seem to be able to use the chips up. They just keep on growing.

Balot was so casual as to seem offhand. The Doctor smiled at her. "Well, then, we'll just have to ask for a nice big *special container* to fit everything in."

The Doctor spoke as if he were ordering a particularly rare vintage wine, and the crowd responded accordingly. The whole floor—up until a few moments ago so serene and tranquil—was now buzzing.

Amid the noise the dealer located another radio to speak to an attendant. To ask him to comply with the Doctor's request. To bring out the casino's greatest treasure.

Eventually the attendant emerged from the other side of the floor, carrying a scarlet box.

He placed it down on the table and opened it, reverentially, for Balot to behold. No sooner had he lifted the lid than a golden light spilled out into the room. The light from twelve golden chips.

"Now, choose whichever one you like," the Doctor said in an encouraging tone.

Balot knew exactly what she was doing. Gingerly, she reached out and took one of the chips that had the OctoberCorp company emblem etched onto it. The crowd bubbled up again.

"Oh, and leave the box on the table, will you? We may need a few more of those chips before long."

The Doctor's words caused yet another stir in the crowd. *A match with million-dollar chips at*

stake! Normally such a thing was unheard of outside the special Shows.

Far from worrying about his catastrophic loss, the dealer seemed to be getting angrier and angrier. He started shuffling again, with a vengeance. Fully intent on taking back what he had just lost.

As he shuffled, Oeufcoque was surreptitiously dissecting the contents of the chip. He caused part of the glove to turn, gently fixing Balot's hand so that it made a fist shape, with the chip packed away safely in her grip out of view.

Miniature laser cutters appeared inside her fist, moving about inside the space of a few millimeters to scan the contents of the chip, extracting its contents.

–Got it. This is where Shell's memories are stored.

Oeufcoque extracted the contents of the chip carefully, cutting them out with absolute precision, taking care not to damage any of the contents. He then transferred the contents into a little pocket in the gloves he made specially for the purpose that moment. The pocket was sewn up behind the memory chip, and the hole left in the original was filled up with identical material so that no one would ever have been able to guess that it had been tampered with. The whole process was done in absolute silence.

To take the yolk without touching the white or the shell. This was what it was all about. The whole operation took slightly less than five minutes.

Balot's right hand was released, and she slowly opened her hand that held the chip.

–One down, three to go.

The words floated up inside Balot's left hand, and she squeezed back in return.

At that moment, Balot was assailed by a sensation she hadn't experienced before.

Oeufcoque's writing was always inside her glove, never on the outside. The letters themselves were inside out. Furthermore Balot's hand was bunched tight. Their conversation should have been utterly undetectable to the outside eye.

And yet, at that very moment, Balot felt that their conversation was being *watched*.

Chapter 10

MANIFOLD

01

"I can't tell," remarked the man watching the screens, "which of them is the mark." He slumped down into his fake leather chair.

The control room was bathed in the light of countless screens set into its walls. The room wasn't made for a large number of staff—it was for this man alone.

Behind the man stood a floor manager trembling with anxiety and fear.

"Look at this," said the man in the chair. "It's like he's being toyed with. You're the floor manager—if you had to say which one of them appears to be getting roasted, who would you go with?"

"W-well, Chief, it seems to me that maybe it might be Marlowe?"

"Yes, I agree. With the incidents in the poker room and at the roulette tables, how many people are going to have to be fired today?"

The floor manager recoiled. Management of the dealers was his responsibility, and to him, there was nothing as chilling as a runaway dealer.

"Well, it's no use," sighed the chief, running his finger along a shiny black moustache. "Run a graphical search for any images we have of these guests."

"S-so, you're saying they're cheats, Chief?"

"No, we can't tell just from these screens. All I need to have is an excuse ready for the boss, if it comes down to it. Say they're later found to be cheats, and we haven't done anything about it. You and me and Marlowe, all three of us will get to be real swell pals, just three more dupes on the next bus to the employment agency."

"R-right. So, how many people do you want on this?"

"Just you will be enough. Get twenty or so videos, send them to me, and go to sleep. But make it look like a few dozen others worked on it. Got it?"

"R-right. But, do you…when you say I can just sleep…"

"Once you've done what I've said, I'll have my excuse, if it comes down to it. You, on the other hand…"

He made an exaggerated gesture of slashing his finger across his neck.

The floor manager gave a hurried bow and turned to leave, when a figure appeared before him. He took a misstep and froze in place.

A frantic voice came booming into the room. "Why are you calling for me when I'm in the middle of important business?"

The voice's owner had swarthy skin and wore Chameleon Sunglasses the turquoise color of a robin's egg.

"What's going on? House Leader? Chief? Special Consultant?"

All of those titles belonged to the man seated in the fake leather chair—the question seemed to ask, "Which do you prefer being called?"

Not responding to the rapid-fire bluster, the chief turned to Shell-Septinos, slowly pushed two palms in the air, then looked at the floor manager and said, "You called for him?"

"Y-yes. Th-that's what the regulations say to do."

"Yes, that's right," said the chief, as if condescendingly praising a little child. "That's the

regulations."

The floor manager, caught between the chief and the owner, scrunched down his shoulders, as if he were shrinking into himself.

Shell barged into the control room, glaring at the two men, and barked, "Some rich person is winning like crazy, and that's got your spines all bent out of shape?"

"Some show-off prick with a girl along. Not that he's a show-off prick because he has a girl with him. What I'm trying to say is, he's a show-off prick. Word from the floor is they're uncle and niece."

"What's their winning percentage?"

Shrugging his shoulders as if it were nothing, the chief answered, "A little more than sixty percent."

Shell took off his sunglasses, and his Emperor Green eyes shone with rage.

"Sixty percent? Over how many games?"

"Last time I checked, two hundred sixteen."

"What's their method?"

"We don't have any theories. We don't know. They use the basics, sometimes. They don't seem like anything more than a couple of amateurs throwing their chips around."

"I see. Like someone who, after throwing their chips around, turns one hundred dollars into more than seven."

"Well, it can happen sometimes."

"I suppose. I've seen it myself. But what are the chances someone can randomly throw chips around and win more than sixty percent of the time?"

The chief, as if the motion were more of a bother than it was worth, made a circle with his right pointer finger and thumb. The circle itself had no meaning, but the space between his two fingers carried his silent message.

Shell nodded. "Right. Not one in thousands."

"But not zero, either."

Shell bellowed, "Are you trying to be funny with me, Ashley?"

The floor manager trembled, but the chief, like a scolded child unrepentant, simply scratched his cheek.

"Take care of them," Shell continued. "As if they were pros who came with clear plans. That's an order."

"Pros, you say… They don't look like pros to me."

"I'm the one who will decide that. Show him to me, that show-off prick."

Shell leaned forward, looking over the chief 's shoulder at the screens on the wall. With a shocked expression, he said, "I see. That is one show-off prick. Like some cream puff playing dress-up as a hustler. You're right, a pro coming in here looking as stupid as that, that would be…"

His voice trailed off into silence.

For a moment, the low buzz of running electronics was the only sound in the room.

The floor manager, unable to withstand the silence, asked, "Boss?"

But just then, Shell exploded, "What the fuck is this?!"

The floor manager jumped. The chief, calm as ever, simply furrowed his brow as he gazed at Shell.

Shell was staring at the screen with a dumbstruck expression, his face pale.

"What the fuck! What the fuck are they doing here?"

"What, you know them?" the chief deadpanned.

Shell, his face tense, as if a loaded gun were pointed at his head and the safety had just flipped, stared down at the chief and said, "Ashley, kill them. Chop them up with your cards. Give them your usual."

"What? You mean, kill them dead, kill them?"

The chief formed a gun with his fingers. He aimed his index finger at the screen and mimed the pulling of the trigger.

Shell shook his head condescendingly. "That isn't your job. I'm talking legally. With cards. There's no need to take their lives here." He straightened his posture and took a deep breath to calm himself.

His voice dropped to a whisper. "They came here to completely waste my time. Time is vital. And I'm not talking about the regrettable wastefulness of the passage of time. Time is dreadful. Because time that's passed affects the time that's left."

The chief lazily tilted his head.

"Don't you understand?" Shell continued. "I'm running from time's curse. That's how I've been able to climb this far. But my method isn't perfect. That's how I end up in situations like this. Things I'm supposed to have forgotten flash back. Flashbacks—this world's foulest curse. And I hire men like you to cast them away. Men like the card killer. Do you understand?"

"Yes, well, sort of," the chief muttered. Then, remembering something, he said, "By the way, Boss, about the people we had to let go today—"

"You mean the mechanic in the poker room?"

"No, no, who gives a damn about a little twerp like that? But down in the roulette area, someone else was fired."

Shell nodded curtly. "What about her?"

"For a casino around these parts to fire Bell Wing? That's unbelievable."

"Get to the point."

"Couldn't you let her stay? I'm asking as a representative for the employees here."

Shell aimed a scornful smile at the chief. "And what kind of representative are you?"

"One who's loyal to his boss, of course."

"Good. I'll consider it. But only once you've completed your work. Now, I have to greet the partners in my important business deal. Understand? While I'm gone, do your job. To the fullest of your abilities. That's why I pay you so well."

"Understood, Boss."

The chief bowed respectfully. Without getting up from his chair, of course.

"That's an order, Ashley. Don't let them any closer to me."

Shell put his sunglasses back on and stormed out of the room with such force that, had the door been closed, he would have kicked it right down.

The chief muttered, "Flashbacks, huh. I don't want a job where the trigger's being pulled on me." He turned to the still-cowering floor manager. "Hey, you. I'm changing the plan."

"H-how so?

"Split the files into two thousand pieces and mobilize all the dealers currently on break. Track all of their movements since the moment those two entered the casino, and report everything

directly to my ears."

In time with the last two words, the chief tapped his headset.

"I'll be with you. Don't let them leave here alive."

The floor manager's face tightened in an instant, like a soldier just given orders to launch the assault in a battle where victory is assured.

"Yes, sir!"

He swiftly did an about-face and left at full speed, not stopping to look over his shoulder.

"What's with those two?" the chief grumbled. "One's the dog wagging its tail, and the other's the tail wagging its dog. How insipid."

He leaned back into the chair and returned his attention to the monitors. Noticing something in the picture, he touched his finger to the screen. The ConsoleView, responding to his touch, froze the image. He slid his finger right, and the playback rewound.

"Ah, that's too far back."

This time he slid to the left, and the image moved forward frame by frame.

The chief stared at the screen. On the other displays were playbacks from other, random points in time. As he looked from screen to screen, he snorted like a dog on the scent.

"So she's left-handed."

But the girl on the monitor was taking in a chip with her right hand. Not just any chip, but one of the most valuable chips in the casino—in all of Mardock City, even.

"Hmmm… I see," he said, nearly yawning. His eyes were affixed to her left hand.

"I don't know what your trick is…" he muttered with indifference, "but those gloves are well made."

The chief—Ashley Harvest—hauled himself up out of his chair and slid his feet out the door of the control room.

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Shell dashed into his office and, like the fleeing heroine of a horror movie hiding herself in a room, closed the door with the slightest of sounds.

With one hand he snatched a microphone and into it shouted orders to his staff to take over his hosting duties, and with the other hand he mashed the redial button on his cellular phone.

Finally the line connected, and a low voice came over the phone—the steadfast voice of a man charged with erasing Shell's flashbacks.

–It's me. Weren't you supposed to be in the middle of a deal, Mr. Shell?

"Boiled! It's awful! Where the hell are you?"

–I'm investigating them. What's wrong?

"Investigating? Investigating? What are you talking about? They're here, right now!"

Boiled was silent.

"They're here, all dressed up, like they're going to a party!"

–I see. I thought so, Boiled said under his breath.

Now Shell was silent.

–I've been searching for them in your casinos. Of the four, I just finished up at the second.

You're at Eggnog Blue, right? I'll head over immediately.

"Y-you knew? That they would come to one of my casinos?"

–I found a card game crib sheet in their hotel room.

With a trembling hand, Shell removed his sunglasses. His eyes were wide with the dawning realization of his current situation.

–Are you there? Boiled asked, and Shell jolted back to attention. *Please answer me this. Whatever is involved with your business deal—is it there or not? That's all I'm asking.*

Shell's mouth worked open and closed and open again, and finally, he took a deep breath and said, almost in a moan, "This is where my first Show was. It was my first step… Everything always begins here."

After a brief pause, Boiled said, *–I will be there within an hour. I will take them down. My* usefulness *will prove that you've made the best decision.*

Boiled disconnected.

For a time, Shell remained still. Then he muttered a single word.

"Usefulness…"

A bold smile spread from cheek to cheek.

"Yes," he whispered. "Your existence is indispensable. You're the hammer of God, and you'll shatter that filthy rotten egg."

He put his Chameleon Sunglasses back on. The lenses had turned a harsh red color.

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"Isn't it a little early to leave?"

Just as Bell Wing had finished packing up her things in the anteroom, Ashley called out to stop her. He was rugged, well built with wide shoulders. An oddly charming expression spread across his normally stern face.

He coolly looked at Bell.

"I didn't know Ashley Harvest was the kind of man to waste time on someone who just got canned."

"You know, I'd like nothing more than to have all the other high-paid staff besides me gone." Ashley made an embarrassed shrug. "But you're a renowned croupier in the industry. You attract customers, and besides, isn't there such a thing as duty in this business? Are you going to leave without training a successor?"

"I don't know when you decided to start acting like a manager, nor do I care. I'll have you know, I'm not particularly unhappy with my dismissal."

"Oh, that's the first I've heard that."

"Well, it's true. This is by my will. And nobody has the right to criticize it. Who said I was going to retire from the business, anyway?"

"I'm not saying it. But the rookie croupiers, they say you've chosen your own successor, and they're pretty upset about it."

"Ah. Yes, it's true. That girl…" Bell gave a heartfelt nod. "The rookies here are considered first class, but she had talent to surpass them all. I'm not saying the rookies are bad, either. It's just

what I saw with my own eyes."

"For those who want to be seen by your eyes, that's a bitter pill. So what? You're going to leave here to nurture that girl?"

"Heavens, no. I don't think she'd be interested. I'll just keep throwing roulette balls. Sometimes, I might throw to the right, that's all. Thinking the whole time…maybe she'll come…"

"Then couldn't you stay here a bit longer?"

Bell shook her head coldly.

"Even if, as a representative of the employees, I can turn the odds between me and the owner in my favor?"

"I don't see why I owe you anything. What, you want my recommendation to the Casino Society for you to run your own place?" Bell asked.

"No, no. You're a gambler through and through, aren't you? Or a loan shark, more like it, trying to find the monetary value of every single one of my words. You're the epitome of a gambler."

Ashley lifted his hands, raising his pointer fingers. Speaking in hushed tones, he continued. "We don't know the true nature of our opponent. She's going by a pattern we've never seen before. She's using some system toward some purpose. We're working on an analysis, but by the time our staff finishes the marathon of the graphical search, she may already have passed the finish."

"She's that good?"

"She's playing blackjack, and she's called for a million-dollar chip."

Bell frowned and looked at Ashley as if she'd misheard him.

"And she's asked them to leave the eleven remaining chips at the table."

"To think someone other than you could do such a thing." Her eyes turned to the corridor leading to the casino floor.

Ashley broke into a smile. "You want to see it for yourself, don't you?"

Glaring at him from the corner of her eye, Bell said, "I'll decide when I see her. If I don't find her interesting, I'll leave, then and there."

She started down the corridor.

With a slight shrug, Ashley followed after her.

As they walked, she said, "So this opponent is so good you think someone will be needed to check for the next ones with the same tricks?"

"Yeah, basically. If whatever she's got is good enough to get a million-dollar chip, copycats may appear at all the other casinos too."

"If you devise any countermeasures against her system, who will you tell it to? The boss?"

"Don't be stupid, Bell." Ashley waved his hand as if he were shooing away a fly. "I've got a connection at the top of the Society. If my countermeasures get used by all the casinos in the Society, it'll mean a lot of money. Then I wouldn't have to work for that fool of a boss any longer."

"Don't you like it here?"

"I overlooked it for a while, since there's little trouble and the pay is good. But I can't take it any longer. Our boss had a fifteen-year-old girl living with him—and not as her proper guardian, if you follow—but even worse, he's so crazed he tried to kill her by blowing up his car engine. For the life of me, I can't understand why the Society still lets him have a job."

"Yeah, that's a mystery. I don't even want to know what his real job is. Look, I've got too few years left in my life without getting involved in all this," Bell said. "Anyway, if this opponent of

yours isn't interesting, I'm going home. My kids are old enough to support themselves. My only reason for still being in this place is just to lend some meaning to an old hag's prolonged existence."

As if presenting to her that meaning, Ashley led her into the VIP room, pointed, and said, "That table."

Bell froze.

"Her…"

"Her?" Ashley tilted his head.

He looked at Bell and, putting more force into his voice, repeated, "Her?"

Bell nodded. She stared at the girl. She stared at the girl seated at the VIP table, who was intently focused on the dealer's shuffle.

"Her? She's the one you decided would be your successor? Oh, she's trouble." He snapped his fingers enthusiastically.

But Bell's solemn expression remained unchanged, intently focused on something. She didn't even respond as Ashley goaded her, saying, "So now what? Are you going straight back to the bus to take you home?"

She only muttered, "A fifteen-year-old… Death by an exploding engine… So that's it. That's her purpose. When you stand in her way, to her, it's like a test bestowed upon her by the Holy Ghost. And everything has led me here."

Ashley, somewhat taken aback, gazed into Bell Wing's face. "Have you had some revelation? You quit your job as a croupier, and now you're a prophet?"

"I wish you had a little more faith, Ashley. But I should thank you. You brought me here. But I'm just here to observe. I won't try to interfere. If I do anything to help, it'll be after this is over."

"That's fine. As long as you'll be my witness, the Society will understand. But Bell…what do you know about them?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Just the girl's name."

Ashley shrugged his shoulders to say, *That's fine, so tell me.*

"Rune-Balot," Bell stated with a solemn face. "That's her name. It's a sorrowful name; a fitting name."

"Marlowe John Fever."

At the sound of the harsh, chiding voice, the dealer's hands froze, and his face went cold. The dealer, having surrendered the first of his crop at the end of a long, brutal cat-and-mouse game, had stopped, completely motionless, in the middle of his shuffle. Marlowe turned to look at the speaker and found a small envelope pressed against his chest.

"Here's a reference letter," Ashley continued. "Maybe you can use it to find work someplace else."

The dealer felt as helpless and humiliated as if he were held up at gunpoint.

"It's not addressed to anyone. It just has my signature. Make as many copies as you'd like. Just take it and get on the next bus before the owner finds you. You weren't able to become a star here, but you can still try somewhere else."

Marlowe hung his head in utter shame. His expression was so dejected that one could scarcely believe it was the same face that had been so passionate when he had been shuffling the cards. Heartbroken, his shoulders sagging as if carrying a heavy weight, he slunk off the floor. The word *defeated* had never been so fitting.

"That's quite different from what you told me," Bell said to Ashley, standing at his side. "And I'm not sure if I believe you actually signed that."

Balot didn't watch the retreating Marlowe, nor did she look at the man, dressed as a dealer, who had just dismissed him. Her gaze was fixed on the cold figure of the old woman.

"Good evening. Miss. Sir." Ashley stepped up to the table and bowed gracefully. "It seems our young man is having quite the tantrum. He wanted to keep on playing with you, but we have rules here. Now, if you don't mind, I'll switch out the cards with new decks."

Not to be topped, the Doctor graciously replied that it wouldn't be an issue. Ashley nodded and tossed the used cards into the proper slot beneath the table. He withdrew six fresh decks, cleanly removed their seals, and displayed the cards. The Doctor nodded his approval, and Ashley began carefully shuffling the decks.

Balot looked at Bell. Since Bell had been staring at her the whole time, their eyes naturally met. The old woman didn't smile, but she spoke with a certain fondness.

"Good evening, Rune-Balot. We meet again."

–Yes, Bell Wing. We do at that.

Without realizing it, Balot had broken into a grin. More than wondering why Bell had come, she was happy to see the woman again.

A curious sense of security came over her—and a feeling of relief at seeing the old woman out of her croupier's uniform. Bell's appearance made it clear that she had indeed been dismissed from her job. Strangely, Balot felt no remorse. The girl knew that the battle between her and Bell was already in the past.

"So you really were after something big, weren't you?" Bell spoke in a tone clear of any clouds of hostility or regret.

–I'm just having some fun. I thought I might learn something.

"You seem like the sort of person who can learn anything. You've got that kind of face."

Bell turned her eyes to the shuffle, as if to tell Balot, *You should be watching too*. But it didn't matter—even if Balot wasn't looking, she could still sense each and every slightest movement of this new dealer's shuffle. He shuffled carefully and with no wasted movement. Calling his motions smooth wouldn't quite be right—they seemed completely natural. In contrast to the previous dealer, who showed off his smooth technique, Ashley was simply doing his job.

–Do you play blackjack too?

Bell, keeping her attention on the shuffle, answered, "No, this man just persuaded me to come watch."

–Do you know each other?

"His name is Ashley Harvest. He's something of a bodyguard for this kind of business. For him to show up, this must be no ordinary matter. So I'm here to see how well you can stand up to his skills."

Ashley glanced at Balot. "She's here to make sure we have a fair match. So please don't be concerned."

Even if he didn't exude the same fighting spirit as the previous dealer had, he seemed even more indomitable. More than Bell Wing, even.

"This man's luck doesn't spin counterclockwise like mine. He has no weaknesses. Remember that."

–I will.

"I'll be watching over you. Over the whole game. You don't have a problem, do you, Ashley?"

Taking it as a signal to begin, Ashley nodded and calmly assembled the cards into a neat stack. He spoke softly, but his voice carried.

"Right. From this point on, this table is reserved for you two only. Think of it as a modest gesture of appreciation for retiring that mechanic in the poker room, Bell Wing right here, and the fine young dealer who sat at this table."

He might as well have just come out and said, *I know what you've been up to*. After that near declaration of war, Oeufcoque commented,

–We anticipated this would happen. Don't take his bait. Let the Doctor handle him.

Dr. Easter, as if on cue, spread his arms fearlessly and, sounding quite pleased, said, "Our very own private table! Why, that is quite the luxury!"

Ashley raised a finger and, beaming a smile as if he were their accomplice, said, "That should make it easier for you to win, right?"

His candidness was startling—indeed, a sustained number of matches was required for card counting to be effective.

"If it's all right," said the dealer, "the minimum will be ten thousand dollars."

"Is that a table rule?" The Doctor crossed his arms and, as calmly as if he were haggling over vegetables at the market, shook his head. "Maybe I want to try my hand at another table, then."

Ashley replied without hesitation. "Fine, we'll go with a ten-dollar minimum bet." He pointed at Balot's chip. "That way you'll be able to play a hundred thousand games with that single chip."

"Then we're agreed," said the Doctor. "Ten dollars it is."

Ashley nodded and set the transparent red card on the table, inviting either Balot or the Doctor to place it in the deck.

Reaching for the card, the Doctor said, "You're quite the unusual dealer, aren't you? I'm eager to see you deliver on what you seem to promise."

He casually inserted the red card into the stack of cards.

Ashley shrugged and effortlessly cut the deck. He then inserted the cards into the shoe and placed his rough but eminently graceful hands on top of it.

Balot and the Doctor placed their chips. Ashley drew the first card. The game had begun. Their last game—the one they had to survive.

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"We have a push," Ashley said.

The cards disappeared. With just a wave of his hand, the dealer had returned all the cards on the table to the discard pile.

Nothing else moved. Not their chips. Not their determination. Not their tactics.

All that passed by were time and cards.

The Doctor blinked twice and placed his chips on the table.

Balot stared blankly at hers.

The cards were distributed. Ashley's upcard was a 7.

The Doctor had a 9 and a jack, totaling nineteen—stay.

Balot had a 7 and a 3—hit. A 9 card came, and with nineteen, she stayed. A decent hand. But Balot and the Doctor were in no position to make quick judgments.

The dealer revealed his hole card—9. That made sixteen. Following the rules, he drew another card—3. Ashley surveyed the table.

"We have a push."

The watching crowd let out a collective gasp. It was formless, not quite wonder, not quite amazement.

Since the first card Ashley drew, this was the sixteenth hand.

They hadn't won a single hand.

They hadn't lost a single chip.

Both Balot and the Doctor had lost nothing.

Sixteen tied hands, with only the value of the count changing.

Placing his chips on the table, the Doctor cleared his throat and grumbled, "This is quite amazing. There's not even the slightest movement."

With a serious expression and a tone of admiration, Ashley responded, "Just proof that your fortune is an even match for this casino. It's incredible. You're a tough opponent. I'm riveted."

–What kind of man is this guy?

–I can't read him.

Oeufcoque's unexpected answer terrified her.

–I don't understand. What's he after? Is he enjoying this? Is he angry? Is he sad when you draw a card? I can't tell. It's all mixed together. What kind of scent is this?

Oeufcoque was nearly shrieking, but then, as if realizing he was only making her more afraid, he suddenly stopped himself.

–For now, we analyze. We'll hold him off with our best tactics. It's not like we can't keep on counting the cards.

Balot pulled herself together and signaled that she understood. She lightly squeezed her left hand over her leg.

There was a strange tension in the air. The seventeenth hand was also a tie.

Fatigue was setting in, a nameless weariness.

Blackjack demands you endlessly walk a long, long path.

Over the long path, there are ups and downs—the road is never flat. But this—this was like trudging through a barren desert. There was no path to be seen; the scenery shifted from moment to moment, but in the end, nothing changed. All you saw was the flat, boundless horizon.

At the twenty-second hand, something different happened. The Doctor had an ace and a queen. Balot had a 5 and a 6 and hit to draw a king. Two twenty-ones, side by side.

Ashley's upcard was a 2. For the first time in the match, Ashley spoke.

"This is easy. Not having to do anything. I don't have to entertain you, and I don't have to trick you either. You both play with precise tactics. That way, I don't even have to think about anything."

He reached for his hole card. A bad premonition ran down Balot's spine.

It was a 4. The 2 and 4 made six. He drew a card: 4. Another: 5.

Before Balot's dazed eyes, Ashley smoothly, dispassionately, turned over the next card: 6. The 2 and 4 and 4 and 5 and 6—twenty-one.

Balot felt something scream deep inside herself. He was toying with them, with his unchanging cards. A heavy fatigue was building up inside her, even worse than if she had been losing.

Behind Ashley, Bell Wing stood watching with a clear face. After the twenty-seventh tie, Ashley placed one hand over the other and leaned over, like a waiter who had just finished setting down their meals.

"This is a good place to take a break." The red card was on top of the deck, without a single card to spare.

Balot was stunned. And the Doctor, who had placed the card himself, stared at the card shoe as if it were a fortune teller who had just correctly guessed his birthday.

Ashley's bulky hands never paused. He began to shuffle.

"You two have wonderful luck," he said. "I wonder to which one of you it belongs. The gentleman? Or the young lady? Or is there someone else who brings it here?"

Balot could sense information coming to Ashley through his earpiece. How much she and the Doctor had won and in which games. What was remarkable about their methods. Under what circumstances did they prevail. From those bits of information, Ashley had sensed a third party.

–Don't be sucked in by him.

So said the third party. Balot's fists were clenched.

Ashley finished the shuffle. This time, Balot inserted the red card into the stack of cards. His effortless cut seemed to swallow up her influence on the deck with supreme skill.

And as Bell and the large audience watched, the second round began.

Ashley's first upcard was a 2. The Doctor drew an 8 and a 10—stay.

Balot had a 3 and a 5. For a moment, she considered staying, but in the end, she decided to hit. A jack. Eighteen. The same as the Doctor.

Ashley revealed his hole card—a 6, making eight. Next, he drew a queen, making eighteen.

Even if she had recklessly stayed, all that would have resulted would have been her loss.

The Doctor added more chips to his bet. Balot followed suit and raised her bet, from three

thousand dollars to six. It was both Oeufcoque's instructions as well as her desire.

She wanted to feel in control of something, if only to dispel the depressing sensation of total stagnation. And the number of chips she placed before her was the singular thing she had control over.

"Such luck you have," said Ashley. "Its power is affecting even me."

Balot and the Doctor were progressively raising their bets. To the dealer, it should have been a pivotal moment. But Ashley's management of the cards was undisturbed, leaving no openings for attack. He seemed to be taking their hands and instantly ripping them to shreds.

"I've never met a player who could rival my luck. That's why the casinos treat me like the door to the vault. But maybe this time, someone has come holding the key."

Ashley kept repeating that word, *luck, luck*, but Balot and the Doctor didn't think—not even for an instant—that this had anything to do with luck or chance.

Maybe this man had the singular ability to arrange the deck in such a way that the outcome would be inevitable.

A shuffle that could manipulate the order of over three hundred cards—that would be a skill with a singular purpose.

There was no sign of marked cards hidden at the bottom of the card shoe.

It would also explain why he had opened new decks. Unsealed cards could be in any order, but if he knew the order the cards came in, he could potentially arrange the cards using his particular technique. Granted, it was hard to believe such a technique could exist.

But the real problem was what that technique would bring. Their fatigue would build and build, and eventually they would be sent away. But if the casino's orders were to retake her chips, he wouldn't have a way to do so.

Why didn't he have a method to force the players to lose? Was he trying to tell them that they were free to leave now without consequence? Balot didn't know—and she could sense Oeufcoque wanting to ask the same questions. If Ashley wasn't setting some trap, then wasn't he just trying not to do anything? Sure, he was like an iron wall, but he'd be nothing more.

But Balot couldn't quit now. Just because she'd obtained one of the four chips, she couldn't have said, *Well, that's enough for me.*

The Doctor had said that memories were many-body information. They grew along with the passage of time, but at the same time, memories of one time were connected with memories of another. If Shell's memories were divided between four chips, those memories couldn't be reproduced without all four time lines. And if the memories couldn't be reproduced, all they'd have is an album showing the growth process of neurons.

Their goal wasn't that kind of analytical research—it was the details of Shell's deeds, and without those, their entire battle—and Balot's game—would be without meaning.

The Doctor sighed. "We may have to change our tactics." For the first time since starting the game, he took his chips off the table. He placed half of them back down.

The cards came. Ashley's upcard, a queen.

The Doctor had a 5 and a 7; twelve. Balot had a king and a 4; fourteen.

The Doctor hit and received an 8. His total, twenty.

"Hit." His tone was defiant, like an underling in a gangster movie facing down the barrel of a gun, crying out, "Go ahead, shoot me!"

Ashley looked at the 8 and edged up his chin as if to say, "That's the card you got."

"I said hit."

The Doctor hit his finger against the table, insisting on the card.

In the face of such reckless self-destruction, Ashley swiftly turned over the next card.

A 6.

"That's a bust," stated the dealer.

The Doctor shrugged. The situation was obvious. Anyone could see it. Even Ashley.

The problem was that the Doctor had exposed himself. He had called out the perfect deck. But how would their opponent move next? Everything depended on that.

Balot hit. Her card, a 6. Her total, twenty.

–Should I hit?

–Stick to the optimal tactics. Leave the attack to the Doc. Following Oeufcoque's instructions, she stayed.

Ashley revealed his hole card: 4. With the queen, that made fourteen.

He drew another card: 2. He drew again: 4. Twenty.

"We have a push."

This time, he spoke directly to Balot. He swept away the cards.

Calmly, the Doctor whispered, "I guess one card isn't enough."

It was as if hitting or staying made no difference. It was as if the order of the cards itself was undaunted.

The Doctor placed his chips, half again the amount of the previous hand.

Balot kept with her same bet. As Bell Wing quietly watched for any changes on the table, Ashley brought his hand to the card shoe and swiftly dealt the cards.

His upcard was 7. The Doctor had an 8-5, making thirteen. Balot had K-3, for thirteen.

The Doctor hit. He got a 4.

He hit again: 2. His total, nineteen.

As if it were the natural choice, he hit again. Ace. Total, twenty.

And again he hit. For a moment, Balot thought Ashley might get angry, but he didn't. As he coolly drew the next card, he said, "Congratulations."

It was an ace; 8-5-4-2-A-A: twenty-one.

The Doctor immediately looked over at Balot, asking without speaking, *Did he do anything suspicious?*

She answered with a slight shake of the head. Ashley hadn't made the slightest indication of trickery.

"So you'll be staying, then."

You couldn't draw from twenty-one. The Doctor nodded curtly.

–Hit.

Balot received an 8. Total, twenty-one.

The Doctor groaned. With his eyes, he asked Balot again, *Are you sure he didn't do anything suspicious?* But Balot was just as astonished. What was going on?

"Now what?" asked Ashley. For the first time, he focused his dark brown eyes right at her. As he smiled, his eyes seemed to dissect her alive.

"That's some technique."

Bell Wing, who had been quietly watching the game, had spoken. "I don't think there's anyone who could imitate you."

"It's all practice."

He turned over his hole card. A 9. Along with his 7, that made sixteen. He drew another card and slapped down the 5.

"We have a push."

Balot felt dizzy.

Then Bell said, "This has turned into a dull forced match."

Balot looked at the old woman, who was staring right at her.

"Rune-Balot. Are you the kind of kid who lives by listening to others?"

At first, Balot didn't understand what the woman was talking about.

"Chips don't mean anything to you, right? I don't know why you're holding back. You shot down every single last ball I threw, and now you're subjecting me to this nonsense."

As Bell's words drew the girl in, Oeufcoque's rebuttal came bubbling to the lining of her gloves.

–Focus on the game. Don't forget, she's with the casino too.

The cards came.

"You're you." Bell's words struck right through Balot's heart. "You don't have to hold back for anyone. Especially in a big match like this. In a match, restraint is like shit. It stinks and it distracts you."

Then Bell was again silent.

Once more, the Doctor carelessly hit, until finally he bust.

As if hiding behind him, Balot hit.

With a 2 and a queen, she got a 7, making nineteen. She stayed, and Ashley revealed his hole card.

With a 4 and a jack, he drew a 5, making nineteen.

Ashley's voice, announcing the tie, seemed to come from somewhere far away.

Subconsciously, Balot bit her lip. The next hand, the Doctor once again bust himself before her turn.

Balot received a 2 and a 9. She doubled down and drew an 8. Nineteen.

Ashley's upcard was a 9. The hole card, jack. To no one's surprise, a push.

Again she bit her lip, hard. The next hand, the Doctor bust, Ashley revealed his hole card, and as he announced the tie, the pain of her teeth gnawing at her lip snapped her back to reality.

Slowly, she pulled her lip from her teeth, and as she wet her lips, she felt a realization come over her. She had chosen this game. The game of whether she would live or die. And that was one answer to her question *Why me?*

It took a moment for Balot, distracted by those thoughts, to realize that there had been a change in the cards. The change occurred when the Doctor returned to the optimal tactics.

Balot's eyes were focused on the reveal of the dealer's hole card.

The upcard was a 5. The hole card, 9. He drew a 3. Seventeen.

"A loss…and a push."

Confused, Balot checked the Doctor's cards. Jack-3-3. Sixteen.

Balot's cards were 5-7-5. Seventeen. Only the Doctor had lost.

Dr. Easter silently placed his next chips. Balot bit her lip again.

Ashley dealt the cards. Balot had no clear sense of his fingers. No sense of his fingers. Scathing doubt washed over her.

What am I fighting against? This man's fingers?

If he had a gun in his hands and not cards, what would I do?

Simply stare and watch as he pulled the trigger?

For the first time since the beginning of the game, Balot sensed the cards. The stack of cards, how they were ordered. She thought again about whether the cards had been arranged into a certain order.

She heard the Doctor say, "I'll stay."

He had 7-6-6. Nineteen.

Ashley's upcard, an 8.

Balot had J-3. She hit and got a 7.

The card in front of her, Balot was silent.

She felt one with the table. Her nerves spread through it, and she sensed the weight of each card upon her skin.

Speaking gently, as if inviting something, Ashley said, "Will you draw another card? Feel free to ask the man next to you, if you want him to tell you what will happen."

Balot slowly raised her head and sensed the dealer's presence. She wondered if drawing her senses into his fingers alone had been a part of his strategy.

Quietly, she said,

–Stay.

Ashley casually flipped over his hole card.

A 4. With 8, that made twelve. He drew an ace and then a 7.

"A loss—"

–And a push.

Balot completed his sentence. There wasn't a meaning behind it—she just wanted to see how the dealer would react. She wanted to sense his movements, his mood, everything. Ashley shrugged.

"Precisely."

Balot grinned at him. At first, he looked taken aback, then he returned the smile. At the same time, he swept up the Doctor's chips.

The cards came. Ashley's upcard, a jack.

The Doctor's cards were 5-9. He drew an 8 and bust.

Balot kept her senses upon Ashley and transmitted everything to Oeufcoque.

On her left arm, along with the running tally of the true count, the tactical instructions, and other data, was a hastily compiled report of information on the dealer.

Balot's cards were 8-J. Somewhere, she felt Ashley's pulse.

–Hit.

Ashley responded without delay. His movements casual—truly, those were the iron wall.

Balot had drawn a 2.

–Stay.

Following Balot's choice, Ashley revealed his hole card.

Two jacks—twenty.

Something was matching up, she sensed. In the following hand, the Doctor didn't bust, but his J-8 was defeated before Ashley's and Balot's twenties.

"It seems like we're starting to see whom luck favors," Ashley said, sweeping up the cards.

“Those who take even the slightest wrong turn will find themselves immediately parted from luck. She’s nearly impossible to latch on to. No one can ridicule those whom luck has deserted, for it is just that easy for her to leave you.”

He spoke as if the Doctor’s loss had been his plan all along. It certainly wasn’t out of the realm of possibility for that man.

But the Doctor knew his role. He knew what he had to do.

He lowered his bets and determinedly went bust.

Balot bet the same amount again and again. The game wouldn’t end.

Ashley turned an upcard. It was a 6. The Doctor received a 3 and a 9.

“I’ll double down,” stated the Doctor, stacking his chips.

Ashley, as if faced with no other choice but to pull the trigger, handed him his card. A queen. A bust. A cruel defeat, but the Doctor didn’t seem to be concerned with what he had lost.

Balot, with a 4-7, drew a 6. Seventeen. Ashley revealed his hole card: 5-6. He drew an ace, then a 5. Push.

The Doctor slowly rose. He patted Balot on the shoulder and said, “I’ll leave my luck to her.”

He offered her his chips, then turned to Ashley and said, laughing, “And I’ll leave my bad luck with you.”

His actions were the turning point in the game. The order of the cards attested to it.

He retired from the game as soon as he had seen the balance in the cards—if he hadn’t hit, Balot would have won. And if he hadn’t even been there, Ashley would have had twenty-one.

“From this point forward,” stated the Doctor, “I’m just an innocent bystander. Well, a bystander who has an effect on the game. A far-off phenomenon causing a massive local effect—a butterfly effect. And my defeat is the butterfly.”

“The butterfly?”

“It’s a metaphor for a theory of causality. A small occurrence, a butterfly flying on the eastern coast, can trigger far bigger events—a typhoon on the western shores. And I think we are about to prove the many-body problem far more clearly than it has ever been shown before.”

Ashley shrugged his shoulders with apparent disinterest.

“You’re always welcome to join back in.”

The Doctor nodded and patted Balot’s shoulder once more. His message clear: *You don’t have a shield anymore.* Balot looked him in the eyes and asked her most pressing question.

–Do you think I can win?

“Maybe not right away. But there’s one on his side and two on ours. With our combined luck, you’ll win for sure.”

Balot nodded. By *two*, he had meant Balot and Oeufcoque.

The Doctor pushed in his chair and stood behind Balot, next to Bell Wing, ready to watch over the game.

Ashley and Balot were now sitting face to face.

The crowd around the table continued to grow in size, one by one, drawn in by the spectacle.

Bell Wing had nothing left to say.

The cards were dealt. Ashley’s upcard, 6. Balot had Q-4.

So this is how the game has changed, she thought. Up until then, the cards had presented easy choices, but now that the Doctor had left his seat, she found herself faced with a tough decision.

But Oeufcoque’s tactical analysis was steadfast. All she had to do was continue onward.

She hit. A card came—2. Sixteen. Not enough.

She hit again. Ashley’s hand flashed, revealing the next card: 4.

–Stay.

Ashley kept on moving.

His hole card was a 3. He drew another and scored an ace. Twenty.

“We have a push.”

Balot steadied her breath, quietly awaiting the next hand.

Ashley’s upcard came, an ace.

Balot had an 8-3. She almost pressed on with a double down, but at the last moment, she hesitated.

Oeufcoque's tactical analysis displayed double down, but the girl worried about not being able to draw any more cards. If only she didn't have to draw any more. If she didn't have to make that choice, maybe she could have found some peace of mind.

Balot focused on her cards as if she were judging the entire world in a courthouse.

Then, with the sense that she had overcome her paralyzing fear, she declared the hit. A 5 card came. She felt she had made the right decision.

She hit again. The card that came was a 5. Twenty-one.

Holding in a sudden wave of relief, she announced her stay.

Ashley turned over his hole card. A jack. Blackjack.

Balot groaned. The noise was soft, yet her vocal chords were taut, as if she had screamed.

Ashley announced the tie and within moments had begun the next round.

His upcard, a jack. Balot had a queen and a king.

The tactics displayed on her right arm instantly calculated her winning percentage along with her losing percentage and the amount her chips would change. Ashley's pulse was there too, with not even the slightest fluctuation.

The dealer had squelched her brief moment of self-victory.

Or so Balot thought, as she was once again unable to move.

Balot stayed. Ashley revealed his cards. The sharp tip of the ace pointed straight at her. Blackjack.

It was her first loss. Her chips were taken away. But it was still all right. The amount she was to bet plunged lower. But it was forgivable.

Ashley's next upcard, however, wasn't.

An ace. Something inside Balot's chest clenched tight, grating against her.

Balot had K-4. If she hadn't hit earlier, she'd have a twenty-one now.

Where did I go wrong? She couldn't hold back her thoughts. *I never made the wrong decision. But what else could it be called but that?*

What's wrong is this table with this man, Ashley, standing at it. The difference of just one card was chasing her to a certain defeat.

Balot composed her feelings and hit. Her card, a 2. Sixteen.

That number weighed frightfully heavy. Her tactics called for a stay. It was displayed right next to the true count.

If she didn't follow the tactics, what else would she follow? But the choice was heavy. Her throat quivered.

Balot stayed, and Ashley casually flipped his hole card.

A 2. With the ace, thirteen. He drew another card. Again unforgivable. It was a 5. If Balot had drawn, she would have had twenty-one.

"So sorry," said Ashley. It was sixteen against eighteen, and Balot's second straight loss. With a slightly trembling hand, Balot placed her next bet.

"No one can predict the future," the Doctor spoke up. "But it can be approximated. That separates us from animals. We can think with two minds. The stale, old-fashioned, and the ever-changing new—namely, the left brain, and the right."

He orated with the clear, resonant tone of a bystander at ease.

"Humans have cerebral hemispheres—first, because the brain's development was too rapid for the two sides to unite. The neurons projected out from the brain stem and the spinal cord and

formed the cerebral cortex, enabling a great increase in the size of the human brain."

Ashley, already having lost interest in the Doctor's words, paid him no attention.

Bell Wing watched this would-be meddler, aloof—then, seeing through to the seriousness behind his words, wiped the expression from her face.

The cards came.

"But the left and right hemispheres grew abnormally large—almost like a defect—and an imbalance occurred. The left brain became digitalized, with a fluid intelligence. The right brain has crystallized intelligence, in analog. The origin of this behavior can be traced back to the development of the neurons."

Ashley's upcard, a queen. Balot had a 4-6.

Oeufcoque's tactical display read hit. Balot hit.

"Since the dawn of the age of the invertebrates, nerves had been unmyelinated—that is to say, uninsulated, like bare electric cables. The unmyelinated nerves functioned with analog hormones, but with the development of myelinated nerves—that is to say, insulated just like jacketed electric cables—nervous structures came to utilize neural circuits that distribute digital neurological signaling. Therefore, even in the analog human brain, there are digital processes, and they interact with each other to function."

She received a 9. Nineteen. Oeufcoque's tactical display read stay. She stayed.

"Humans can't divine the future. This is because, even with all the mathematical methods known to man, it is essentially impossible to solve for the multitude of occurrences concurrent with the many-body problem. If only one card remained in the deck, its identity could be deduced by examining the discard pile. But with two or more cards remaining, the identity of the next card cannot be determined."

Ashley showed his hole card. A king. Twenty. Balot's third straight loss.

"But humans, with two minds inside one skull, can use both the fluid knowledge—that is to say, the digital neural circuits—to explain a discrete event, as well as the crystalline knowledge—that is to say, the analog perception—to form a comprehensive image of all the other possible events. Therefore, humans have produced the ability to generate simplicial approximations and have essentially solved the many-body problem. By the time they are born, humans have already chosen a journey infinitely asymptotically approaching reality."

Balot placed her bet. Ashley dealt the cards.

His upcard, a 6. Balot had a J-3, thirteen.

Oeufcoque's display read hit. Balot also felt she should hit. She received a 6. Nineteen.

Ashley revealed his hole card, 4. He hit, and drew an ace. Twenty-one.

"And if those humans could create four minds where there had been two, they would no longer need to content themselves with simplicial approximations. No, they might be able to solve the many-body problem and determine each and every event. And for that dream, a being was created. That being was not able to divine the future. But for any object, it could quantify its entire composition, the external and internal forms equally, and become an All-Purpose Tool."

Ashley's upcard was 6. Balot had a Q-2.

She hit. Oeufcoque had told her to. Balot had thought the same.

Ashley showed no change. And his cards showed no change.

She drew a 6. Eighteen. On eighteen, you stayed. She hesitated.

But after a moment, Balot stayed. And she asked herself why she had hesitated.

Ashley flipped his hole card, a 5. He drew a king. Twenty-one.

Balot's fifth straight loss. She was drowning in a marsh of defeat.

But as someone once said, blackjack demanded you walk a long, long path.

And that someone was raising his voice desperately behind her.

"Within the structure of the human brain, the many-body problem is calculated as nothing more than a series of simplicial approximations. But what if, despite having been the reason for the cerebral hemispheres, the development of the brain, too rapid to form a cohesive whole, was able to go on developing externally? That is, what if the brain changed its form and continued developing beyond the cranium, spreading over the whole body?"

Ashley's upcard was a 4. Balot had a 3-5. Hit. A 2 came. Hit. A 4 came. Hit. A 3 came. Seventeen. The tactical display read stay.

Oeufcoque had chosen that as the winning move. Balot stayed.

"I find it impossible to believe that those two beings, who represent entirely different concepts, working together, couldn't read the flow of these cards."

The Doctor had finished, and now he fell silent. He had been trying to wake them up—Balot and Oeufcoque—and their untapped strength.

Ashley showed his hole card. A 6. He drew another. Ace. Twenty-one.

Six losses in a row. Balot squeezed her left hand. She felt impatient. But maybe that itself was some sign. There was still a chance. Just enough of a chance for her to feel impatient. Oeufcoque softly enveloped her arms.

Ashley's upcard, a queen. Balot's cards, 4-8.

Without hesitation, she hit. Ashley drew her a card. A king.

"That's a bust," said the dealer.

On Balot's arm, a number changed, and she realized this was her first bust of the game.

Something had changed. It was a change for the worse, certainly, but it was a change.

Ashley's next upcard was an ace. Balot's cards, J-3.

She hit and received a 10. Bust. Her cards were swept away. Ashley's hole card—an 8—was revealed only for a moment. Balot added it to the true count on her left arm. Along with: *If I hadn't drawn, Ashley would have bust.*

The following upcard, a 3. Balot's cards, A-9.

For the first time in a while, she had a valuable ace in her hand.

Balot stayed, and the hole card was overturned.

A 6. Ashley drew another.

Another 6. Fifteen. In accordance with the rules of the game, he drew again.

And a 6. Under already remarkable circumstances, a remarkable draw. Was Ashley's unbreakable luck within that scarcely conceivable draw?

So, 3-6-6-6. Twenty-one. Balot's ninth straight loss.

But Ballot sensed something. A sign. In the dark, flat desert, she saw a single ray of light.

In the previous hands, the same number had never appeared in succession. If he was ordering the cards, it woud be easier to have some of the same card in a row than it would be to have everything distributed haphazardly.

Had it not happened before because he had been building himself some room to maneuver?

He's skipping some of the cards.

Balot was sure of it. Maybe three times in a round. He was shuffling the cards in a way that

enabled him to tweak the order at will.

Was she taking the threat too lightly by thinking his perfect judgment of the cards was slowly wearing down?

Balot quickly reviewed her count so far. The upcards and aces were running extremely low, but the cards helpful to the dealer were also dwindling. Oeufcoque's instant internal calculations were showing an increase in her bet amount and her winning percentage.

Her fatigue dispelled by anticipation, Balot refocused on the game. Just as Balot had fully exhaled, Ashley's casually stated words cut through her like a blade:

"By the way, your left hand…"

Balot took in a deep breath.

"…it's got some device measuring my pulse, doesn't it?"

Her heart skipped a beat. It was too sudden. Before she knew it, she had raised her head and said,

–Why?

As soon as the word left her mouth, she stopped herself. But it was already too late.

Ashley grinned. He mouthed the word *Gotcha*.

Balot got goose bumps on her arms.

The sudden shock of it had stood her hair on end.

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"It seemed," said the dealer, his tone dripping congeniality, "like you were conversing with your own hand, not your cards."

Terror welled up deep within Balot. Would she fail and leave empty-handed because of the tiniest of blunders? If she were any more afraid, her hands would have been shaking.

Oeufcoque read Balot's emotions and tried to calm her, saying,

–Don't let it get to you. You don't need to tell him anything. Even if he believes it to be true, he can't do anything about it but use it as a diversion. Without any proof, he can't lay a hand on patrons' clothes. He has no way to separate us.

Balot was reassured, but a peculiar irritation settled over her.

And it was peculiar, for she had no means of surviving without Oeufcoque.

She felt Bell's stare bearing down upon her. And she wondered what look the Doctor had on his face. She drew up her shoulders and stared at the cards.

Ashley's upcard was a 4. Balot's cards, 7-6.

As she took slow, steady breaths, she looked at the tactical analysis. Hit. The obvious choice. But she didn't make the move right away. Quietly, she readied herself, and then, she hit.

The card was a 7. Balot held her breath and stayed.

Ashley turned over his hole card.

A 9. He drew a 6. They both had twenty. Suddenly, they had tied.

Balot began to wonder why Ashley had made such an aggressive move. Was the ordering of the cards beginning to strain? Had she finally arrived at the deciding moment of their match?

In the next hand, Ashley's upcard was a 3. Balot had a J-9 and stayed.

Ashley revealed his hole card, a 5. He drew an ace. Nineteen.

Another tie. Suddenly, Balot sensed that she was standing at the brink.

She couldn't stand down. Impulsively, she added chips to the table. Even a little more than Oeufcoque's displayed amount. She was fine with that. She'd be fine if she lost. She just wanted to follow her feelings.

The cards came out. Ashley's upcard was a 10.

Balot had a 2 and a jack—the black jack of spades, the one-eyed jack.

Her eye flashed to the dealer's hole card. Then, she noticed that the red card had reached the top of the shoe. As she stared at it, she declared her hit.

Ashley removed the red card and turned over the card below it. A 9.

Balot stayed. She glanced at the red card lying next to the shoe.

Previously, the ordering of the cards had been so perfect that not even a single extra card was wasted. But now the slightest of cracks was showing.

Ashley revealed his hole card. It took Balot a moment to see it. The ace of spades sat there, like a sword waving in the air without its master.

Beating the dealer to the punch, she said simply:

–We have a push.

The clean split of the ace and jack of spades—a blackjack—seemed to Balot to be evidence of something.

Ashley shrugged. Balot took deep, slow breaths and spread her senses across the surface of the table. She didn't have any desire to sense anything occurring beyond its confines. Not even Bell Wing's stare.

Ashley opened the card shoe and withdrew the remaining cards.

He joined them with the discard pile and began his smooth, natural shuffle.

Balot focused her senses on his movements. The cards, Ashley's fingers, his shoulders, his pulse, his breathing. With senses so finely tuned she could feel each mote of dust as it settled onto the table, she followed his every movement.

Silence testified to the steady tension that filled the table. The only sounds were the calm music flowing through the room, the sharp noise of the cards coming together, and the stir of the crowd.

Balot sensed her own breathing and pulse calm so much that she almost could have fallen asleep. But just then, Ashley spoke to her.

"Can I ask you a question?"

It was almost as if he were asking, *"Please, can I do this job like any other dealer would?"*

–What is it? she said guardedly. Her eyes were open now.

She hadn't needed to respond to him, but she thought understanding this man might be necessary to read him.

"Well, I say question, but it's more like a riddle. If we let the air hang this heavy, then the game stops being fun, am I right?"

Balot tilted her head. Taking that as a yes, Ashley nodded and said, "First, I want you to imagine you are driving in a car on a long, long trip."

–All right.

"And during the trip, your car breaks down. It's the worst possible situation. There are no houses around, just an endless desert. What do you do?"

Balot, with no idea of Ashley's purpose, kept focused on the cards as she answered.

–I'd wait for someone to come help me.

She didn't feel much of an improvement in the mood at the table.

"You'd hitchhike?"

–Yes.

"All right. Now, same scenario, what would you do if you drove by and found someone on the side of the road looking for your help?"

–I'd decide based on if they looked trustworthy or not.

"I see." He nodded, pursing his lips as if he were about to whistle. "Those are both fifty-percent answers. I'd say you're just about average."

The way he said it tugged at her. She wrinkled her brow.

–Are there other answers?

Ashley returned a meaningful smile and said, as if reaching the meaning of the riddle, "Couldn't you imagine a carjacker posing as a hitchhiker?"

Subconsciously, Balot bit her lip again. Ashley was trying to make a point. And whatever it was, it seemed dangerous.

–You mean, what would I do if the other person is a carjacker?

"No, not quite. Who would be able to know if the other person was a carjacker or not? If he was, he'd try his best to hide it, wouldn't you think?"

–So you're saying not to help?

Ashley, still shuffling, laughed.

"The reason I said it was a fifty-percent answer was because, depending on which side of it you're on, your response changes. Let's see… For example, a different fifty-percent answer would be to say that you wouldn't help anyone and you wouldn't expect anyone to save you. Or that you would save them, fully prepared that they may kill you."

Clenching her hands, Balot pressed forward in an attempt to shake off the pressure. Just as the Doctor had pressed him on the cards.

–What's a one-hundred-percent answer?

Ashley shrugged and said matter-of-factly, "If someone asks you for help, kill him. If someone responds to your call for help, he's also fair game. Act like you are going to help, or that you need help, and then take. Take his money, take everything. In the world of gambling, that's common sense."

As he completed the shuffle, he looked at Balot with eyes that seemed almost kind.

"Here, you can't trust anyone. You can't even trust yourself. You understand, don't you? And if you want proof, who do you think is going to save you here?"

Suddenly, within Balot, an unfamiliar enmity sprouted to life. With no outlet for that new feeling, the girl remained motionless as the cards were stacked on the table.

"Here, we can lawfully steal from others. I have to wonder why you've come so blithely to such a place as this."

Finished with the shuffle, Ashley tidied up the stack of cards, then stood with his hands folded together.

He towered before her, all traces of a smile wiped from his stern countenance.

"Has your throat always been like that? Or did somebody take your voice from you? When

you'd been hitchhiking, perhaps?"

The instant his words pierced Balot's ears, her entire body became a ball of enmity.

He knows something, doesn't he? How I was killed. Why I was killed. How I was disposed of, like a thing forbidden happiness and free will.

Her hair stood on end. Her body blazed. The enmity spread like a poison through her body down to every strand of hair. It welled up deep inside her, relentless.

–Balot, calm yourself. You don't know what he's planning. Don't be careless.

Oeufcoque already knew what she was moments away from doing.

–Please, believe me.

–I believe you.

Balot clenched her fists so that Ashley could clearly see them. Hard. So Oeufcoque would feel it. And with all her heart, she said,

–So please, believe in me.

Oeufcoque was silent.

–He's testing me.

In that moment, Balot felt everything become crystal clear. The meaning behind Ashley's questions, why she had chosen this game, and the source of her impatience.

–He's testing you?

–Yes. He's testing to see if I'm playing the game.

Ashley smiled and said, "Is this hard for you? Would you like to move to a different table? Or do you just want to leave and climb back into your motel bed? Take a limousine like the one you came in? Too bad. You've come this far. You can't go back now. Understand?"

Balot slowly opened her fists.

–I understand.

As she spoke, she pushed Oeufcoque into her right glove.

Oeufcoque didn't even have time to say anything. She moved her hands behind her neck and undid the hook connecting her two gloves. The cloth gently slipped from the base of her neck. With her right hand, she gently slid off her left glove.

Just like her clients used to demand. So she could be seen.

Her skin, like a boiled egg with the shell peeled off, was laid bare. She removed her right glove and neatly laid them onto the table. She crossed her naked arms, resting them on top of her gloves.

Her bare skin keenly sensed the table. It was cold against her flesh.

To the girl, it was the feeling of her cool, sharpened heart, resolved either to live or to die.

Balot leveled her cold stare at the dealer.

–Do I look that easy to kill?

Ashley Harvest didn't respond. He only gave one slow nod. Not in answer to her question, but as if seeing her face for the first time.

04

"It looks like I have a formidable opponent."

Ashley watched Balot as she stacked her chips with her bare hands.

With her bare right hand. Her left arm was atop her gloves, which she had spread flat like a tablecloth. The fingers of her left hand were soothingly caressing the gloves.

"If we performed a full search of your body, we might not find anything. There may not be anything there. But that's fine. You took off your gloves of your own volition. Neither the casino nor I forced you to. We're clear on that, right?"

Like a gunslinger in an old pulp Western confirming the rules before the duel, Balot nodded, holding her eyes steady on his face.

"I say you're a formidable opponent because you don't run and you don't hide."

Ashley's hand flicked at the card shoe.

The cards came. The dealer's upcard, an ace. Balot had a 7-6.

Balot thought to hit, and the numbers on her gloves agreed.

She got a 2. Again the gloves said to hit, and she had no objection.

She hit. Another 2 card came, and she stayed. Ashley's hole card was a 6, making seventeen. A push. The cards were wiped, and beneath Balot's arm, her true count updated. Even when cast aside, Oeufcoque wasn't the type to neglect his duties—not as long as his duties coincided with his own wishes.

The cards came. Ashley's upcard, a queen. Balot had a J-3.

Balot hit and added a 4 to her hand. This was a crucial moment. Within the relentless flow of the game, Balot's senses clung to her cards like the cover on a book.

She hit again and got a 3. Twenty. Stay.

Ashley revealed his hole card, a 4. With the queen, fourteen.

He drew a 2 and then a 5. Twenty-one.

Like a hound points its nose, Balot directed her senses at Ashley's rough hands as they moved the cards and chips from play. Even after her somewhat reckless hit, she still lost by a thin margin. But something had changed. She sensed the slightest of movement in the iron wall that was Ashley.

As Balot stacked her chips with her right hand, she snarced Oeufcoque with her left.

–Oeufcoque, can you hear me?

–Oh, I guess I can still receive transmissions from you.

An unusually sarcastic reply from Oeufcoque. That was how much of an effect being pulled from Balot's arm had had on him. As the cards came, Balot grinned with amusement as she stroked the gloves and snarced.

–I have a favor to ask of you. Okay?

The right glove—the one she'd pushed Oeufcoque into—was directly under the shadow of her left arm.

–If it's something I can do.

–It's something only you can do.

She wasn't saying it just to mollify him—it was the truth. With her right hand, she signaled a hit.

Oeufcoque's reply was earnest.

–What should I do?

As she looked at her new card, she considered it.

What should we do? She had only a vague idea.

–I want to add my senses to the numerical display.

Ashley's upcard was a king, and Balot had an 8-5-2. Oeufcoque's statistical analysis suggested a stay. But something tugged at the girl's senses.

–I want to know something besides the numbers. I want you to add it in.

–Besides true count? You don't mean withholding certain cards from the calculations?

–No, I think that's too narrow.

Balot hit and drew a 5. Then she stayed.

Ashley flipped his hole card. A 6. With the king, sixteen.

He drew and slapped down a 4. Twenty.

"We have a push."

As the dealer collected the cards, Balot thought she sensed a slight change in his expression. Perhaps a momentary thought toward vigilance after her last hit turned his twenty-one into a tie.

Oeufcoque's strategy was as precise as ever.

–I will be as reactive to your thoughts as possible. Change the display however you wish. I will keep saving all the data.

–Thank you, kind sir.

–My pleasure.

Balot stroked the glove. At the moment, it was the closest gesture to a thank-you kiss she could give him. To help clear her thoughts, she pushed her senses to the top of her consciousness.

Her cards were a wave of low numbers. Ashley, on the other hand, received large cards, nearly all of them ten cards. If his judgment of the cards faltered by one, the ten card would become his hole card. It was a difficult pattern from which to discern a path to victory.

The pattern arose from Ashley's shuffling technique, but Balot's handling of her cards began to influence the game. The same sequences repeating and the same cards appearing many times in the same hand was proof of that.

As she confirmed those influences one by one, Oeufcoque's numbers gradually—yet steadily—changed. The calculations were Oeufcoque's, but the meaning behind them was up to Balot's senses. Repeated cards and runs of low-value cards could be understood statistically, but that only resulted in a calculation of the winning percentage based on the cards in the discard pile. There was no angle of using it to influence the coming flow of the cards. All she had was a winning percentage and betting management of unparalleled precision.

And that wasn't enough to win against Ashley. No matter how perfect her tactics, he would manipulate the sequence of cards and bog her down in the marsh.

A lull fell over the game, and Balot was inching toward defeat. Every hand was either a narrow loss or a push. She was honing her senses, separating out the things she should be sensing from the things that didn't matter. Ashley's fingers, for example. On both his hands, his pinkies and pointer fingers weren't relevant. They only transported the cards. The movements of his middle fingers and thumbs, however, were essential to his manipulation of the deck, and his ring fingers kept everything in balance.

And the most crucial supports to the structure of the card order were the upcards, from jack to

king. Jacks were lined with odd-numbered cards, kings higher-ranked even numbers, and queens lower-ranked even numbers. Their relations with each other subtly shifted through the deck. But why? Because the game was focused around aces. Depending on the circumstances, the natural rules of the game and the rules of his shuffle joined and separated like a pair of dancers.

As a result of this, Ashley's most important cards were the aces, the fives, and the jacks so tightly bound to the other two. Even more crucial to defend against the player's most profitable victory—the ace and jack of spades.

Balot, utilizing Oeufcoque's precise calculations and her own senses, modified the numerical readings, whose form had become a seemingly incoherent jumble of letters and numbers just on the edge of what Balot could understand.

As the chips kept up their one-sided movement across the table, Oeufcoque and Balot felt more unified than they ever had before. They weren't the protector and the protected. They were one united, leading and following in turn. She felt it in her heart—they were a team. Might those words lead her in a better direction. In her game. In their game.

At the end of the fifteenth hand, Oeufcoque's display was a simmering stew of numbers. Letters large and small aligned with countless numbers, winding and swirling together. It was Oeufcoque and Balot's combined technique, and it was a singular breach in Ashley's iron wall.

Transfixed by the weaving of the dizzying patchwork array of numbers, Balot was unaware of her own change. A change in her body.

The first to notice was the wall, Ashley.

"Do you need to refresh your makeup?"

At first, Balot failed to grasp his meaning.

She thought it was another ploy, but it wasn't. Balot's brow and palms were caked with cold sweat. She had apparently been unconsciously wiping it off. When she saw that the fingers on her right hand were covered with glittering silver powder, she didn't know what it was at first.

Ashley snapped his fingers. A passing staffer came to the table.

The dealer ordered a damp towel. When the man asked who it was for, Ashley turned to Bell Wing and shrugged, as if to say, *What's with this guy?* and *A battle is a battle, but one must be considerate of a lady.* Bell took one glance at Balot and nodded. Then the man understood. It was for Balot.

And Balot, too, finally understood her own state.

Glittering stuff was all over her hands and her arms, her cheeks and her forehead.

It was silver powder. Her skin was emitting glittering silver powder. That was the only explanation. She brushed her hand across her face, and tiny fibrous flecks rubbed off. It felt like temporary hair dye washing out, but she couldn't remember putting that much in her hair.

Balot became aware of a faint itchiness all over her body, like a thinly peeling sunburn over freshly healed skin.

"You're growing…" the Doctor whispered from over her shoulder. "Your metal fibers are autonomously growing to meet your body's requirements."

A waiter came and handed her a wet cloth. Balot waited for Oeufcoque to erase his display before lifting her arm and applying the cool cloth to her face.

The cloth was pleasantly scented. She wiped her arms and cheeks with it, clearing away the mixture of silver powder and sweat. The itchiness across her hands and cheeks faded. She was refreshed.

She wiped her arms and her face as though she were polishing a blade.

The Doctor took the towel from her hands before the waiter had the chance, and said, “If you feel anything abnormal, please inform me right away. Don’t overdo it. Just do what you can.”

He made Balot feel like a boxer facing the next round.

The girl nodded. She didn’t feel anything abnormal. She placed her left arm on top of Oeufcoque, and the numbers swirled against it. In an instant, she had returned to the game. Balot steadied her breath and stretched out her right hand. She placed her chips.

–Thank you for your kindness.

“You’re welcome.”

Ashley put his hand to the card shoe. The game began.

≡

Over the course of the next ten games, Oeufcoque’s display grew even more dizzying.

The numbers swirled, flowing and recrystallizing again under Balot’s heightened abilities and Oeufcoque’s new technique.

The flow was the development of logical measurements and predictions, and the crystallization provided an intuitive grasp of the full context.

The cards and odds coming in waves—these data flowed. There was an awareness of things with a beginning and an end or that were new developments. The fluid data consisted of predictions and measurements based on both established patterns and novel events based on cause and effect. They circled, they spiraled, they oscillated, based on her most recent awareness—that was the flow.

The crystallization, on the other hand, was the connection of multiple points, a patchwork of three-dimensional influences. A comprehensive awareness of sights and space.

With no relation to the passage of time, the connections between past events strengthened until the points coalesced into the nuclei of even larger masses still to come. And from that, their location and orientation became fixed—those were the crystals.

The mutual existence of flowing data and crystallized information was the very essence of human knowledge. Without one, the other lost its meaning. When consciousness was dropped into the vortex of the unconscious, the power of intelligence was born. Everyone had it. It was only waiting to be used.

And at that moment, Balot was greedily feasting upon the sensation of that power. Oeufcoque and Balot were tightly connected, their senses bonded.

At the twenty-seventh game, their senses had melded to perceive a deeply vivid image.

Ashley’s upcard, an ace. Balot’s hand, 5-J. The cards were like the muzzle of a gun in Ashley’s hand, thrust right at her.

Balot muttered.

–They’re pointy. I want to round them off.

She spoke unconsciously, to no one in particular.

To the somewhat perplexed-looking Ashley, she announced her hit.

Ashley pulled a card from the shoe. It was a 2.

–It's still light.

Her voice was soft, but it jolted through the air of tension over the table.

Balot hit. An ace.

–It's getting even pointier.

Grief sounded in her words, but Balot's expression was suddenly taken by a vastness that was hard to grasp. Where was she looking? What was she thinking? Her expression was unreadable. But she was looking at something. She had her sights on it.

The Doctor gulped. Bell's eyes opened wide.

–Hit.

Ashley's hand moved instantly. Even if the card would bring about his own destruction, his practiced hand drew it without hesitation. Such was his skill.

The card came. Another ace. Balot didn't stop. Her body felt like a sharp blade slicing effortlessly through her opponent's windpipe.

–Hit.

Another ace.

–Hit.

Another ace. Balot took a deep breath. 5-J-2-A-A-A-A—

–Stay.

Ashley revealed his hole card. A jack. Ashley stared at the table, speechless. In his place, the Doctor whispered with disbelief. "A push…"

"It seems like it," said the dealer.

He quickly collected the cards, sweeping them into a neat pile, Balot's senses attuned to their movement.

Ashley looked down at Balot's hand. He seemed to stare right through the chips stacked in a neat circle in the palm of her bare hand.

"Do you know why I'm looking forward to the next card?" Balot looked up at him. With a vacant expression, she nodded deeply.

She had become so focused on the game, she had forgotten to think of him as her enemy.

–If it's a king, you'll lose. Especially if it's a spade. It'll mean you separated them for nothing.

She appeared lost in thought, as if still trying to figure out why her statement was true.

"You do know, then?"

Balot tilted her head.

"You managed to weather my special move, and I'd prefer not to think of it as by chance."

Finally understanding his meaning, the girl nodded.

–I think I know.

"You've seen through my shuffle?"

His face was mischievous, but there was a bluster in it that betrayed a small thread of fear.

Balot looked at him and slowly shook her head.

"Then what do you know?"

–Until a moment ago, the upcards have all been your allies.

Her eyes gazed distantly upon the card shoe.

–But now I too have allies.

Ashley, his hand still atop the shoe, shrugged and said, “For sure. But I don’t think you have many.”

–I don’t need many. It’s enough to know I have them. That’s all I know.

“But will they arrive in time?” He smiled sharply at her.

She thought for a moment, then answered.

–I don’t need to win many times.

Ashley’s smile froze. For a brief moment, his eyes went completely expressionless. Somewhere deep inside him, his caution toward Balot transformed into animosity.

Balot tapped the table. Ashley’s hand flicked out the cards.

His upcard, a 5. Balot’s hand, J-J.

–It’s like they’re fighting. And just when I’ve come to save them.

She looked at the jacks with disappointment. The red and black one-eyed jacks.

–But I’ll stay.

Without hesitation, Ashley turned over his hole card. A king. Spades.

Beneath Balot’s left arm, Oeufcoque’s swirl of numbers adjusted.

Some of the suits pressed together, amassing into an iron wall.

With great contentment, Balot watched the dealer draw his next card.

He drew a 6. Twenty-one. He was an overwhelming fortress.

Ashley’s thick hands casually collected her chips. The cards went too.

Balot’s eyes remained on the table as if seeing the afterimage of the cards: 5-K-6 and J-J.

“Have you had enough?”

Balot sensed something behind his mocking words. He was trying to hide the moment of defenselessness born of a hastily built defense.

That held the true meaning of building an impregnable iron wall in this game.

Balot snarced Oeufcoque.

–I want to bet on clubs. So they will become my ally.

–Understood.

He didn’t ask why. He didn’t ask how it would quantifiably affect her chances of winning. He wasn’t blindly following Balot either. It was his own decision based on his instinctive knowledge of her thoughts.

Oeufcoque was in the fight too. As a part of their new combination.

Balot smoothly placed her chips. Her impatience had vanished completely, not like the shadow had lifted into dawn, but as if her senses had pierced the unpredictable darkness, adding their own light to it.

She felt herself becoming one with the game. The cards were her, and she was new.

It was stress, it was hostility, and it was a blessing.

Ashley’s management of the cards grew more and more skewed. That determined which cards Balot should chase after. Her 10 and 9 of clubs were impeded by the ace and king of spades. Next the 4 and 5 of clubs brought forth the king of clubs, only to be crushed by the jack of hearts and his reinforcements, the 3 and 7 of diamonds.

Balot’s senses reached out like a hand searching through the darkness and colliding with something, for the ever-widening crack in Ashley’s flawless handling of the cards.

The scariest thing within the darkness, thought Balot, *is to be struck motionless from fear,*

unable to move even a single finger and to be freely used.

Once, she hadn't the will to resist being used. She had thrown away her senses. Until she'd met Oeufcoque. And now, from within her thin shell, she sensed with voracity. Suddenly, a sharp odor came to her nose. A phantom smell. A smell like the cologne Death would wear came over her body, enveloping her. Balot thought back to the time she'd been trapped inside that car, when the stench of gas filled the space. At that time, all she could do to survive was to withdraw into herself.

At that time, she thought she would die. Sad and pitiful.

But they came in time.

Ashley's upcard, an 8.

Balot's cards, 3-6.

All of them clubs. Balot's finger tapped the table.

–Hit.

She received a 6. She raised her finger, then tapped the table again.

–Hit.

With a flutter of Ashley's hand, her next card came—6.

So, 3-6-6-6. She had seen it before, but now it was on her side of the table.

The same card appeared three times in a row—that was the wailing of the iron wall as she pried it open.

Balot stayed. Ashley turned over his hole card as if lifting an impossibly heavy weight. The ace of spades. Ashley's guardian deity had appeared. But it was too late. With the 8, he had nineteen. Balot won.

"Congratulations," said the dealer with a smile. Before retrieving the cards, he handed out her winnings.

But neither his smile nor the winnings impressed her.

Her honed senses focused upon one point among the swirling numbers.

Now or never. So Balot thought, and so Oeufcoque thought.

–Next hand, please.

She turned over her left hand, and with her right, she grabbed it from her palm and gently placed it upon the table.

Until both her hands were back on the table, Ashley didn't move a muscle.

The crowd of onlookers gasped. The golden million-dollar chip was in play.

"Balot…" said the Doctor. He wasn't calling for her. It was just a whisper, pregnant with surprise and anticipation.

Bell's eyes were steady upon her.

Balot tapped the table. Ashley's eyes flicked over to the golden chip, and his hands casually slid the cards from the shoe.

His upcard, a jack. Balot's cards, A-4. All of them spades.

The cards were his sword swing, and Balot attacked them head on.

–Hit.

A card came. The seven of clubs. Her ace, once worth eleven points, was now worth one.

–Hit.

Balot tapped the table without hesitating, as if keeping in beat. Ashley didn't slow either. The

card came. The 7 of clubs. Nineteen.

Balot took a deep, slow breath, then announced her stay. Ashley turned over his hole card.

It was a 2. The red card showed on top of the shoe. Ashley removed it without a word. His eyes held on Balot. Balot looked only at the cards.

The next card came. A king. Of clubs.

"Balot, you did it…"

The words came rushing out of the Doctor's mouth, but he quickly composed himself. The game was only beginning.

Without turning to him, Balot nodded and, careful not to disturb her inner rhythm, moved her gaze to Ashley.

As he swept away the cards, his mouth curled into a frown. He looked back at her with a joke in his eyes. He started to say something but was cut off.

"Did you see that?" Bell said. Her voice was cold, but a reserved smile was on her face. "Women can endure much more than men. No matter what you might say about this girl, she knows what it means to endure, more than you can even imagine."

"And here I was, thinking we were on the same side, Bell."

With a stunned expression, Ashley reached for the box at the edge of the table.

Waving her hand as if she were clearing away the smoke from a cigarette, Bell said, "If the match were to end that easily, it wouldn't be interesting."

Ashley shrugged. He lifted the box of golden chips into his hands and said, "There's still plenty left."

He offered the box to Balot as if the weight of it pulled down on his arm.

For a moment, she wanted to say that she wasn't after all the chips, but she stopped herself and reached for the box. She wasn't after the chips themselves. She didn't want the shell or the white. She kept her mouth shut and repeated to herself the Doctor's words: *Go for the golden yolk.*

Her bare fingers grabbed a chip. One with the OctoberCorp emblem stamped on it—one tightly packed with the rotten insides of certain man's egg.

She squeezed the chip in the palm of her left hand and placed it atop her gloves. Then she pushed the box aside with an almost foolish reverence. She watched Ashley begin the shuffle as she stashed the chip between the two gloves.

As Balot's senses followed Oeufcoque's work and Ashley's shuffle, Bell Wing placed a hand upon her shoulder.

"I have a little soliloquy to mutter to myself. I don't want to get in your way." This was Bell's way of talking to Balot without causing the girl to turn around. "There's just one thing I want you to remember. One thing I taught to you. Even if unnecessarily. Something I couldn't help but say."

Balot, still focused on the shuffle, nodded.

–To aspire to womanhood.

"Yes. It's simple. All you have to do is be a woman, and you'll be all right. Be the person you should be, you'll be all right. If not, you won't be able to talk with the cards. And if you can't talk with the cards, you can't beat this man. You don't want to lose, do you?"

–No, I don't.

"Good. You have a pretty face."

–Thank you, Bell.

Balot touched Bell's hand. It was a kind hand. And it was a stern hand. It gently moved away

from her and settled on the back of her chair. Both Bell and the Doctor placed their hands on her chair, watching over her.

Facing down the three of them, Ashley frowned. Over the sound of the cutting cards, he growled, “I should have asked someone else to come be my witness.”

"There's something I'm having trouble believing," Ashley said, casually shuffling the cards. "You seem to be trying to understand luck. And what's even harder to believe is I think you may already understand it. What I've wagered my entire life to understand. All while you haven't yet been at this table for a single hour."

–I'm learning from you.

Her answer was candid. Balot felt gratitude for the man before her.

–I feel like I'm learning a lot at this table. Thank you.

Ashley scowled, resentful of hearing those words from a fifteen-year-old kid. But then, his dour expression was tinged with a bit of affinity for the girl as he said, "Are you trying to learn the secret of my shuffle? Is that your aim?"

Balot's vague expression seemed to say *Maybe I am*.

"Well, it's impossible. I wouldn't even know how to teach it if I wanted to. I have no way of nurturing a successor. It's a problem, really." Ashley shook his head, and from his expression, he seemed to be genuinely wrestling with the problem.

–I think I know.

"You do?"

–Not your shuffle itself. How no one else can understand it.

"I see. Yes… Have you ever thought about luck?"

–I think it's bad. I've thought that often.

"Life is like that sometimes. But have you ever thought about how luck controls us?"

–I've thought that I was at fault.

"Well, people can think that way sometimes."

–I never think about the times I wasn't at fault.

"Yeah. You're modest. Well, kids can end up thinking that way when they don't have any decent adults around them… Now—and I'm talking about practicality—have you ever thought more deeply about luck?"

–You mean, can I win against you?

"Yes."

–And the secret of your shuffle?

"Exactly."

He spoke like a kindly teacher explaining multiplication tables to his elementary class. Like he was presenting it as a new concept to kids who knew nothing of arithmetic other than adding and subtracting.

"For example, you speak in words, don't you?"

Balot tilted her head. Of course she did.

"So, what makes words?"

–Mouths…and pencils?

"Yes. And computer keyboards, and voice recorders, and sign language, and so on. But how were the words themselves made? What caused the words to be created?"

–God did.

Ashley paused his shuffle to say, “No, but you’re not far off.”

He conversed skillfully, as if that were the true role of a dealer. At the same time, Balot sensed Oeufcoque draw out the yolk from the million-dollar chip. As she participated in Ashley’s conversation, she was careful not to lose the tension and rhythm of the game.

“Let me tell you a story. Some time ago, a large amount of research was conducted in an attempt to teach computers to speak like humans. The laws governing language were programmed in, and when people talked to them, the computers would respond with computer answers. But it didn’t go very well. If the words spoken to the computer were even a little wrong, all kinds of problems would result. Even though they taught the computers human language, the human side was flawed. To solve the problem, they introduced all sorts of new laws into the computer, but it was all of no use.”

–Why did people want computers to learn how to talk?

“Haven’t you ever tried to use a computer without the benefit of language recognition? If computers malfunctioned after every little email, what would happen? Isn’t your own voice thanks to a computer?”

–So how did they teach the computers?

“They shuffled the words.”

–They shuffled them?

“They gathered up twenty years of newspapers and fed all of the articles into the computer. Millions and millions of words entered sentence by sentence. From that, they instructed the computers to determine which words had the highest probability of following each word. The words most likely to follow ‘Hi’ were ‘how are you doing?’ And so on.”

–So it’s based on probabilities.

“Yes, the probability of occurrence. That’s how computers understand words. And there are no flaws. No matter what word they encounter, they learn from it, and they learn how to use it. That’s how language recognition software finally became robust enough for the commercial market.”

–You’re saying we speak by chance?

Ashley grinned like a man atop a mountain welcoming another climber to the summit.

“The fact that we even exist is by chance. Don’t you think that’s a miracle? Chance is the most essential thing given by God to man. And humans, we strange creatures, find our own foundation within that chance. It’s inevitability.”

–What do you mean, inevitability?

“These cards, for example—the number of cards in this deck is determined, right?”

–Right.

“But sometimes it increases and decreases, right?”

–Right.

As Balot answered, she realized it was a self-implication of cheating. She looked at him with a surprised expression.

“But the cards are the cards. A never-before-seen upcard won’t just suddenly appear. There’s no ‘B’ card after the ace. It’s only a game because you know what cards are in the stack. Just like our words, the order of the cards comes about by chance. But when it settles into shape, an inevitability is created. Without chance, there would be nothing.”

Balot nodded. She noticed that Ashley’s artful shuffle was nearing its finale. And his speech

was too.

"Dam up a river, and the water will overflow. Split it into tributaries and the volume of water in the main branch will lessen. And without any rain, it will dry up. Inevitably. Luck is like the flow of a river. The issue isn't whether or not the flow really exists. The question is, will the river keep flowing? We all live inside the flow of the river. And if there are those who drown in the river, some of them will drag down the swimmers so that they alone float. But what the river has to teach us is that once you become a part of the flow, you become the river itself."

The last words perfectly coincided with the readying of the deck. Ashley placed the red card in front of the stack and looked at Balot. Fondness glimmered in his gaze.

Balot took the red card and, in a declaration of respect to the dealer and his finely crafted stack of cards, inserted it squarely into the center of the deck. The cards were already full of her influence, just as the words exchanged between two friends differed from the words others used to talk to them.

Ashley cut the cards. It happened in an instant. And within that instant, the dizzying swirl of numbers underneath Balot's arms had already begun to respond. The order and probabilities of the cards were nearly squeezed onto a single point. It was as Bell said. Balot's only chance was to strive to be who she should be.

She placed her chips—the amount required to draw out her moment of victory.

The cards came. Ashley's upcard, a queen.

Balot's cards, A-5. Balot hit: 7.

Again she hit: 6. Nineteen. She stayed.

Ashley kept up his smooth rhythm like the game was a conversation and their cards the words. They understood each other completely, and he had no need to pause.

Ashley's hole card was a 6. With the queen, he had sixteen.

He drew another card and found a 2. But that was it. Balot won.

Ashley counted out her winnings and placed them beside her pot.

She took half of the chips and added them to her bet.

–Next hand.

The next hand, Balot received a J-9 and stayed.

Ashley's upcard was a king, his hole card an 8. Balot won.

In the next hand, Balot had a 9-4, drawing an 8. Ashley's upcard was a 10 and his hole card, a king. Balot won.

Neither Balot nor Ashley made any comment about Balot's sudden winning streak.

Beneath Balot's arms, Oeufcoque crunched the numbers and adapted his display. His powers of calculation were now a part of her. And Balot's senses passed through to Oeufcoque. Hit or stay. Split or double down. They reached the same decisions simultaneously, and each time the answer came from place. A place they had constructed over all the previous games, a wave just big enough to win on. She was entranced, but it was natural to her now, and she wouldn't have known it unless she looked back. Balot did what she had to. That was the answer. And yet, it wasn't enough.

The fifth hand ended. Balot had won them all.

The stack of chips in her pot grew ever larger.

At times, it supported her as she pushed through the game, and at other times, it was a burden.

The answers reached by Balot and Oeufcoque had leveled out.

Like her fifty-percent answers to Ashley's carjack question.

After the seventh hand ended in Balot's win, Ashley suddenly interjected.

"Do you remember our talk about the hitchhiker?"

Balot glanced up at him and nodded.

"There's more to the story. Can I tell you?"

He placed her winnings beside her pot as if to say, *I'm not trying to get in the way of the game.*

Balot nodded and added a third of her winnings to the pot.

–Yes, please tell me.

"I don't usually tell anyone this."

The cards came.

"I had an older brother. My only brother. He was irreplaceable."

His upcard, a king. Balot's cards, A-8.

"One day, he saw a hitchhiker on the side of the road. He stopped his car and let the man in."

–Okay.

She indicated a stay. Ashley turned over his hole card.

"And he killed my brother. The murderer was never found."

An 8. Balot won. Ashley took in the cards.

"He was shut in the trunk. Left under the hot sun. For hours upon hours he suffered dehydration and suffocation, and then he died. In the darkness, alone."

He distributed her winnings. She added them all to the pot. The cards came.

"After my brother's funeral, I went with my father to the place his body was discovered. I got into the trunk and had my dad close the lid. I wanted to know how my brother had felt."

His upcard, a 5.

"It was awful. It was terrifying."

Balot's cards, J-2.

"I thrust out my arms into the darkness. Then came my father's voice. Pull on the hook, there's a hook. I listened to him, found the hook, and opened the trunk."

Balot signaled hit.

"I, in my brother's place, escaped from the death trap."

A 9. She signaled stay. The hole card was turned. A 9.

His next card, 6. Twenty-one and twenty. A narrow win.

"If only my brother had had knowledge of the car."

The cards were taken and her winnings stacked.

"Or if only someone had come by to tell him about the hook."

She added her winnings to the pot. The cards came.

"Or if only he had the luck to find it on his own… If any of those three things had happened to my brother then, he wouldn't have died."

His upcard, 8.

"Which of those three a person has—that's what separates people from other people. People without any will lose in turn."

Balot's cards, 5-Q.

"I don't know which of those three—knowledge, someone else's assistance, or luck—you have, but because of it, you live. And you must never forget it."

–I won't.

Balot nodded. Her finger tapped the table, requesting a card.

It was a 6. In a display of respect for his heartfelt talk, she held the tension of the game for a moment as she silently considered his words. Then she stayed.

Ashley revealed his hole card. A 9. With the 8, seventeen.

It was Balot's ninth win. Her winnings were now virtually spilling forth from her pot. But it wasn't yet certain. It wasn't yet a one-hundred-percent answer. She had to find her hundred-percent answer to equal that of the dealer's.

Winning made her far more nervous than losing had. To have a winning streak is to keep running at the same speed—or even accelerate—down a narrowing foothold.

If she lost her balance for a second, she'd fall.

For the first time, Balot realized that Mardock, the Stairway to Heaven, placed even more hardships on people as they climbed toward greatness than it did on those who fell.

She added a fourth of her winnings to the pot, enduring the strain of the weight of it as she climbed one step at a time. When the cards came, the weight only became harder to tolerate, and she was struck by the desire to look away. That was her biggest temptation. Just look away, just for a second. She knew it would make her feel better. She ground her teeth together, resisting. If there was only one moment in her life when she had endured for something worthwhile, this was that moment.

Ashley's upcard, 3. Balot's cards, K-6.

Balot hit. A 3.

–Stay.

Ashley showed his hole card: 2. Five. He drew another card: 8. And another: 6. Nineteen to nineteen. Ashley's luck had shown itself again.

"Push."

It was almost a whisper.

Balot left her bet as it was and called for the next hand.

Ashley's upcard, a king. Balot's cards, 8-9.

–Stay.

Ashley's hole card, 2.Twelve. He drew another card and found a 5.

Another push. Worse still, if Balot had hit, she would have bust.

It was a critical back-and-forth match. And the next game was another tie. The chips in her pot remained unmoved. The center point pulled at by two opposing forces, motionless as the locus of their struggle.

Ashley had stopped talking. Balot was also silent. Only the game moved on. Dr. Easter and Bell Wing simply watched. The gallery was growing in number, one by one. Music played, passing through the rhythm of the cards before disappearing again.

The ties continued. Not just once or twice. Balot trudged through the dark desert. But this time there were morning stars twinkling in the sky. She could see them. They were fellow travelers, walking beside her. Cold tension and anxiety. Impatience and fatigue. Their footsteps in time as they marched in the same direction. The same direction as her. This wasn't as foolish and simple as when she was worried about averting her eyes.

After a time, the twentieth hand passed in a tie, and with the twenty-first hand's tie, the cards began to unravel, and with the twenty-second hand's tie, like a wave cresting against the cliffside

and shattering into pieces, an inevitability started to form.

Ashley placed his upcard for the twenty-third hand. A king.

Balot's hand was filled with a 3-5.

Balot hit and received a 2. She hit again and the 4 came to her heavy. She steadied her breath, preparing herself for whatever was to come, and said,

–Hit.

She willed her eyes not to turn away. A 5. Nineteen. Stay.

Ashley turned over his hole card. It was an ace.

Ashley won. Balot's chips were wiped from her pot.

Balot watched it happen. The empty space where her chips had been seemed to whisper to her. *Now is the time. Your lost chips were your high ground. Now you must jump as it vanishes out from under you. You're jumping from the high ground you've built up.*

If you miss your landing, you're dead by the very height you built.

Balot prayed for courage. It wasn't that hard. If what she had gained was everything, and it was being tested, all she had to do was open her hand and show it.

She opened her left hand. She pulled out her first golden chip and placed it softly on the empty table. The crowd suddenly began to boil.

–Next hand.

Ashley nodded.

The cards came. His upcard, an ace. Balot's cards, 7-7.

The red card appeared in the shoe.

Ashley removed the red card. Balot inhaled and exhaled. She touched her hand to the second gold chip. She could sense that its contents had been extracted.

She set the second chip on top of the first.

–Double down.

All sound vanished from the room.

It only took two chips to freeze the entire casino. Two million-dollar chips.

Amid the stinging silence, Ashley solemnly touched his hand to the card shoe.

The card came vividly, the burning red suit striking Balot's gaze.

A 7.

A red 7.

This was a clear sign: this would be Balot and Ashley's final round.

Two sevens and an even number of eights remained in the deck: a card order designed to prevent an instant victory for the player. The third seven only appeared due to the skill of the dealer and the judgment of the player, both of them exceptional. The three cards known as the "Glory Sevens" sat before Balot's eyes. Between diamonds on the left and on the right pulsed the seven of hearts.

Their suits as red as blood. In truth, the three cards were blood. Not spilled blood, tragic and bereft of hope. But blood shed in spirit during their long battle.

To properly respond—to give her one-hundred-percent answer—was not only her own personal goal, it was merited.

–Even money.

Ashley gulped. His hand, prepared to reveal his hole card as soon as she stayed, trembled in midair.

It was the choice to throw away the blackjack payout. And the path to the minimum guaranteed winnings.

"You want to throw away a six-million-dollar payout? You know that's a difference of four million dollars!"

Balot sat motionless.

The Doctor's hands shook on the back of her chair.

Next to him, Bell Wing closed her eyes, then opened them again when the moment of silence had passed.

"I never thought you'd be able to throw away a chance of winning six million dollars. I miscalculated. I am utterly defeated. Now I've seen courage. I've seen humility. For the first time, I've seen somebody beat me completely."

He slowly lowered his hovering hand to the table.

Suddenly, Balot's vision clouded, and she could no longer see.

Tears filled her eyes. They wouldn't stop. Their warmth flowed down her cheeks and, mixed with the thin layer of silver powder on her skin, fell to the table. As it all spilled, her only thought was, *I did this*. She had climbed the last step of the stairway to heaven and jumped into space. There she set foot on a new stairway—one entirely her own.

She was frightened. Her body shook. She summoned the courage to take one step forward.

Only later did she realize she had been crying endless tears. And from her trance, she spoke to her rival. How she had won. Why she had been able to win.

–I was trapped in a car when people came to save me. Like your brother, I too have died.

Ashley sighed.

"You're like a mermaid." He shrugged. "You remind me of the story of the fish who exchanged her voice for a pair of legs to walk on land. Even if she did end up dissolving into foam, she was a brave woman. Even though each step felt like a sword passing through her, she walked the land because she wanted to know the truth."

He turned the hole card. Balot couldn't see anything through her tears.

"I didn't think this card would be defeated."

–I can't see it.

"It doesn't matter. You won. A perfect victory."

Two cards rose through the haze, symbolic of the man before her.

The ace and the jack of spades. The strongest blackjack—the one-eyed jack.

Chapter 11

CONNECTING ROD

Everyone waited patiently for Balot to finish wiping her face with the cloth.

Ashley didn't even ask what she intended to do for the next game. Neither did he collect the cards in preparation for the shuffle. He just waited for her.

When Balot eventually finished wiping the tears from her face and looked up, there was Ashley, holding out the box. The box full of golden chips.

Those on the floor watched in stunned silence as Balot reached for the box and took a golden chip, one with the OctoberCorp emblem etched on its face. When Ashley said, *And now please choose your other one*, the whole crowd seemed about to faint. Balot checked for the last OctoberCorp emblem—the final piece of the puzzle—and once she'd located it, she gingerly took the chip into her care along with the other three.

"Perhaps you might be able to share with me—only if it suits you, that is—just what it is about these chips that you're seeking?" Ashley said as he placed the box—now deprived of a third of its golden luster—back into place.

Balot casually slipped the chips into her glove—as if they were unimportant—and answered him.

–I made the trade too, I think. Like the mermaid with the sorceress. So that I would be able to walk, in a manner of speaking.

"So that's what you're aiming for, is it? To be able to walk properly?"

–I think so.

Ashley nodded, greatly impressed. Or so it seemed, but then he frowned.

It wasn't Balot's fault, though—indeed, his sudden change of demeanor was nothing to do with her and everything to do with the barrage of words that were now assaulting his ears through his earpiece. Balot knew immediately who was haranguing him so—not so much from the voice, but from the words themselves.

If the vicious words of recrimination were anything to go by, this was indeed a cursed man, the man whose life was full of the emptiness of his own creation.

Balot watched Ashley as he winced and then cringed under the vicious barrage of recriminations and insults. Somehow she found it funny.

–The owner of the casino, perhaps?

"As you say, miss—very perceptive of you. Looks like we've not just entered a minefield but also stepped right on top of a charged mine to boot. I am sorry about this—I would have liked to present a more professional face to you…" With the last words, Ashley's glance flickered toward Bell Wing.

"It's a bit too late for that, Ashley. You've long since fallen for this girl," Bell Wing pointed out, bringing him back down to earth. Ashley grinned good-naturedly. Balot thought she'd seen this smile once before somewhere.

He turned back to Balot with the same expression and continued. "I have one round left to win everything back from you and finish you off, apparently. Otherwise it's the flamethrower."

–Flamethrower?

"Pink slip. His dismissal papers," Bell Wing explained. Ashley bowed to confirm this—*just*

so.

"Looks like this is how it's going to end for me, then. One more round is nowhere near enough time for me to find a way to beat you. It might be a different story if we had another ten rounds or so, of course, but by then I'd probably be rooting for you anyway; I'm sure I'd want you to win by the end, which would kind of defeat the whole object, wouldn't it? Hmm, what to do…"

–Please call the owner of the casino here. I want to return these chips to him in person.

Balot felt the information on the third chip being sucked out from within her glove as she spoke. Ashley was rarely lost for words, but he was now. He turned to look at Bell Wing.

In turn, Bell Wing was no less surprised. The two dealers looked at each other in silence for a while, trying to work out what was behind this sudden turn of events and what it could mean.

When the silence was eventually broken it was in the form of a roaring laugh from Ashley.

"Man, you really got us, didn't you. Are you saying that it was never your intention to try and break the bank here?" Ashley's fine-whiskered face was now creased in laughter, as if he'd just been subjected to a barrage of the most hilarious comedy known to mankind.

Balot nodded, and Ashley looked up to the heavens. "In other words, you've already found what you've come for. A target that we never even knew about and *still* don't know the details of… Incredible. Well, you know what? I may be here as the *yojimbo*, but my job is to protect the casino—I'm not a bodyguard. The owner will just have to fend for himself. And if you're after him, miss, I can't say I rate his chances too highly."

Bell Wing was nodding too—she had finally understood it all.

Ashley looked back at Balot, then placed his massive hand over his equally massive chest. "I'll be praying for you, miss, that your magic spell lasts as long as possible." His tone of voice was now dignified and polite, in such contrast to his raucous laughter of a minute ago that Balot wondered whether she had dreamed that laughter.

–Thank you.

Ashley's infectious grin emerged again, and he walked away from the table.

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Balot looked over in the direction Ashley was moving and *snarced* Oeufcoque softly.

–That dealer—he's a lot like you, Oeufcoque, you know.

–You think so? In what way?

–In many ways. He just is, kind of. He has his strict side but also a gentle streak. And he's a unique personality.

–Just your type, then.

–I guess so. Jealous, much?

Oeufcoque didn't reply right away. He left a short pause—signifying that he was somewhat preoccupied with the delicate operation involving the million-dollar chips—before answering.

–I'm not aware of any such symptoms, no.

–That's a shame. You're allowed to be a *little jealous, you know.*

–Sorry about that.

Oeufcoque was apparently unaffected, and Balot felt a bit disappointed. But then more words

floated abruptly up on her hand, as if Oeufcoque was spitting the words out in spite of himself.

–I was frightened back then when I was removed from your hands. I thought you might be throwing me away.

***–But I** want to use you, Oeufcoque. In exactly the way that you want me to.*

She patted her gloves gently as if to reassure him that this was indeed the truth. She stroked him like a mother stroking her baby's face to tell it that it was special, beloved, *wanted*.

It dawned on Bell Wing that Balot was up to something. "Are you speaking to someone, young lady?" Bell Wing was as sharp as ever.

Balot just nodded, truthfully.

–Yes. I'm speaking to someone who helps me out.

"Your guardian angel, no doubt."

Balot smiled. Then she turned her eyes to the table. The deserted table.

She needed to compose herself, to prepare for the man who would soon be arriving here.

As if she too were inside the trunk of the car that had contained the corpse of Ashley's brother.

This was a battle fought over the right—*the privilege*—of starting everything anew.

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"They're coming," Bell Wing whispered.

Ashley led the way, taking his characteristically large strides, flanked by two other men. One of them was the man Balot had been expecting all along. The other she didn't recognize. Ashley's demeanor wasn't so much that of an employee escorting his bosses to a gaming table as that of a jailer leading condemned prisoners toward their place of execution.

Oeufcoque gave Balot the full briefing so that she was absolutely prepared for what was to come.

–It's Cleanwill John October. One of the leading directors of OctoberCorp. He's Shell's direct supervisor, as it were, but he's also the father of the woman Shell's planning to marry.

The man that Oeufcoque was describing was also a giant. Not just big or fat. This was something else; his body was a mass of solid flesh. The stereotype of fat people was that they tend to have happy, jovial faces, but this certainly wasn't the case here. The man wore a black sneer that seemed to look down on all the other people on the casino floor. His eyes oozed disgust at the fact that he even had to *look* at Balot. Balot, in turn, found his expression so repulsive that she struggled to think of a reason why she shouldn't just shoot him dead right then and there as a service to all of humanity.

The moment they arrived, Ashley stood stock-still and did his best to blend into the background like one of the decorative plants—he knew his role was over.

The lump of meat from OctoberCorp glowered at Balot with pure disdain.

Suddenly, Balot picked up a million-dollar chip in her hand and tapped it lightly against the table, spinning it around casually as if it were a one-dollar coin. A coin that had the OctoberCorp emblem emblazoned on it.

This seemed to have the desired effect—if she couldn't shoot the two men dead in their tracks, this was a damn good substitute, and their reactions were almost as satisfying.

Shell's and John's faces went blue simultaneously. They both seemed equally fit to burst, likely to spew forth torrents of bile and rage at any moment, but they both managed to keep it in, just about, nostrils flaring, and Balot wondered how much more it might take before they spontaneously combusted.

Cleanwill John October's eyes narrowed, and he spoke.

"Get the chips back from this *girl*. Fail and you'll meet the same fate as the coin being spun round and round."

Shell's face went blank—he was like a hit man who had been ordered on a suicide mission—and he moved into the dealer's position.

His Chameleon Sunglasses glinted muddy blue.

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Shell's posture straightened the instant he took his position at the table. It was as if his whole body had transformed into a machine.

This man was now standing before Balot because *he had to*. He was prepared for the inevitable. He was ready.

Shell took off his rings. His seven rings, each one adorned with a Blue Diamond. Those repulsive little jewels made from the ashes of his mother and the six young girls he'd killed. Balot had been destined for ring number eight, but here she was now, watching with a blank face as the rings were placed on the table.

Back when Balot was *with* Shell, it used to be her job—one of her jobs—to look after those rings during the Shows. Now the rings just lay silently on the table, their jewels shining up at her like frozen tears.

Shell put away the cards that had been used for the previous match and took out a new set.

He started shuffling—a shuffle familiar to Balot, one that she remembered from long ago. She remembered that there was a time when she had found it beautiful, elegant. That was only a few months ago, but it seemed like many lifetimes past. Now Balot could see that Shell's movements might have been smooth and flashy enough, ideal for impressing the punters, but there was very little substance to them—he was nowhere near as skilled with the cards as Ashley, for example.

Whirlpools of numbers swirled around at the base of Balot's left arm as the pile of cards was prepared. Balot reached out for the transparent red marker and took it in her hands before Shell had the opportunity to offer it to her.

Balot's eyes met Shell's for the first time since that night in the AirCar.

She sensed his eyes opening wide behind his sunglasses.

His eyes were filled with a deep, deep anger—and at the root of this was an overwhelming fear that Shell couldn't even understand, much less come to terms with.

Balot felt the dregs of an old memory dredged up from the murky past: the memory of Shell lecturing her ever so calmly about the definition of love. The words popped into her head, then disappeared again as soon as they came—but not before she had said them out loud.

–You're going to be the prettiest little ornament there is. Everyone's going to admire you, and respect me. Because I have all the money and love that anyone could ever want.

Silently, Balot thrust the red marker into the pile of cards.

–Just do as I say, and everything will be all right.

A faint, scornful sneer played across Balot's lips as she said the words, and she jerked her head at Shell—and the cards—to indicate she was ready.

Shell's face was peculiarly shy at this moment. What was he feeling? Embarrassed? Bashful?

At the very least he seemed to recognize that the words that Balot had just spoken were quotations, phrases that he had once said to her, even if he couldn't remember actually having said them. He had made long-forgotten promises, and now he was being held to account.

Stuck for words, Shell focused his attention on the cards at hand, cutting them, preparing them.

That handful of movements told Balot everything she needed to know about just how much control Shell could still exert over the cards—and how much control he had lost.

She waited for Shell to finish placing the cards in the card shoe, toying with the four million-dollar chips in her hands, as if to say *I hold your heart in my hands*.

–I'm not the impatient sort, my dear. I like to take my time.

With these words, Balot placed a chip in the pot.

It wasn't one of the golden chips. Rather, it was an ordinary hundred-thousand-dollar chip. Shell had evidently been expecting one of the million-dollar variety, and he gulped, then eventually exhaled deeply.

–Let me peel your layers off one by one, my little one.

Balot smiled as she spoke. By now, Shell wasn't the only one to have realized that she was quoting verbatim words that Shell had said to her, once upon a time. The others around the table were listening with keen interest.

"You filthy gutter-born whore…" Shell muttered, touching the card shoe as if in some sort of warped act of purification.

The Doctor and Ashley scowled when they heard his words. Only Balot and Bell Wing remained unaffected, unflinching.

Shell flicked the cards out of the card shoe. Violently, recklessly, like a hotheaded teen rebel quick to snap out his jackknife and lunge at the opponent who had enraged him so.

Balot dodged the blade in a deft movement, then crushed all resistance with a single blow.

–There's nothing to be embarrassed about, my little one.

Shell continued dealing, trying to appear unconcerned.

–You look a little frightened, but don't worry, I like it that way. It makes you look even more alluring.

Balot continued to smile a seraphim's smile at Shell, who by now was gritting his teeth so hard it seemed like he was about to break his own jaw.

She was smiling, but her eyes blazed with her true feelings of animosity.

Balot took those hate-filled eyes off Shell for a moment and refocused on her cards. She was deciding what she wanted of him, *how she wanted him*. She was going to release him from the waiting—the worst part, that moment before the customer told you just how he was going to enjoy you. Just as Balot had suffered in the past.

Her eyes snapped back up toward Shell, and she called out her move.

–Now, open your legs wide, little one, and show daddy what he wants to see…

Then, when Shell showed no sign of understanding, Balot rephrased her instructions.

–Stay.

A fat vein started visibly throbbing in Shell's temple. He struggled to suppress his fury as he flipped over his hidden card. Slowly. Not in order to put his opponent off. No—Shell moved slowly because his foul, abject mood meant that he physically couldn't move any faster.

The game had begun. Balot's farewell game to the casino, her lap of honor. A game just for her.

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Ashley and Bell Wing were the first to realize what was going on.

The Doctor knew already, of course, as it was none other than the Doctor who had hatched the plan in the first place.

The only ones who remained oblivious to the end were the man from OctoberCorp and Shell.

Shell's mind wasn't even able to comprehend the possibility that something was going on—that he was being *played*—or, if it was, he soon suppressed those errant suspicions. The only thing that Shell knew was that he was winning, over and over, just as he did in life, and his victories were all he had to hold on to from amid his shame and disgrace.

For Shell *was* winning. From the very first hand up to the ten-game mark where they currently stood, the cards seemed to be going his way.

The Doctor's plan was unfolding nicely. *Your target is the golden yolks—don't touch any white or shell. If you do end up getting some along the way, be sure to return them immediately once you've reached your objective.* Balot understood what she had to do. The only question left now was the matter of timing. So that the plan would achieve its maximum effect.

It was around the twelve-game mark when it happened. The upcard was 9, Balot's cards were 3 and 8.

The melee of figures at the bottom of her left arm showed her what she needed to do. Balot hit.

The card she received was a 6. Then she hit again, a 2. Total nineteen. At first glance it looked like her recklessness had paid off. In particular to the man from OctoberCorp, standing behind Shell and the chips, glaring over all he could see.

Balot glanced up at him before calling out her intention to stay.

Cleanwill John October, the man from OctoberCorp, wore a fearsome expression. Unrelenting and relentless. As if he wouldn't permit Shell to lose a single hand, let alone the game. An impossible demand. Like ordering him to play Russian roulette with an automatic pistol.

Shell turned over his hidden card. An ace. Shell had won, by the narrowest of margins.

"Ha!" John yelped in satisfaction. Shell smiled even as he looked on at his cards with a grim expression.

Shell was hanging on by a thread, and he knew it. Balot was on the crest of a winning wave, on the ultimate winning streak, and yet she was somehow suppressing it. Leaving the door open to Shell. Cutting him some slack, giving him some rope—*for what?*

She was planning something. He could smell it. Even in his present state, Shell was still Shell, and he was usually the first to pick up on this sort of thing.

But it was already too late. The race had already begun: a drag race, where speed was everything and the first to cross the finish line took it all—and then mid-race Shell realized that

the finish line was actually a chicken run straight to hell, and yet he couldn't slam on the brakes or he would lose, and lose everything. *Damned if you do, damned if you don't.*

Balot's hundred-thousand-dollar chips had run out. Before long she had also exhausted her supply of fifty-thousand-dollar chips too, and was on to the ten-thousand-dollar chips, burning through them steadily, one after another, like a chain smoker his cigarettes.

What did the others in the casino—the players, the dealers—make of such a scene?

Let me help you with that, they would have been thinking, most probably. They would have taken the chips in their hands and ran from the casino as quickly as their legs would carry them.

It was only common sense, after all—winning streaks didn't last forever.

This girl and the lanky man beside her had lost it—they were suckers for pushing on past the point that their luck had run out, for not knowing when to quit while they were ahead.

Now their recklessness had driven the casino mad, forced the house to call in its big guns, and their chips were crumbling away like an asphalt road under a jackhammer. An unstoppable force—and one that nobody had any inclination to *try* and stop.

The whole floor seemed to feel this way.

And this was what Balot and the Doctor needed in order to bring the final act to an end on the requisite bang. How would the regulars who haunted this place react toward those who had just wandered onto their turf and won a fortune, and not even a small one at that? Some would be prepared to kill the interlopers to steal their newly acquired riches. Others might try and team up with them, use them to win big for themselves. It wouldn't just be the other customers who felt this way but many of the dealers too, no doubt. Either way, they were a veritable hornets' nest, ready to sink their opportunistic stingers into those who won big—another hurdle for Balot and the Doctor to contend with.

The best way to subdue the angry hornets was to smoke them out and put them to sleep. To do this, Balot needed to lose big, and conspicuously. If she was seen to stumble, to trip and drop her fat purse in the gutter, to watch its gold contents irretrievably washed away by the effluvia—well, then she'd be of no more interest to the swarm that was only after one thing. Indeed, once they'd seen she'd lost, and lost everything, they'd see her as jinxed and avoid her like the plague.

Even so, Balot still had to win in her own way.

She had to bring verisimilitude to their little act. More importantly, she had a bad debt she needed to pay off.

The upcard was 5. Balot had a queen and 2.

–Stay.

Waiting for the dealer to bust.

Shell's face showed his despair even before he turned his card over. No doubt he already knew the distribution of the cards, helped by information fed in from his earphone and the watchlike device on his wrist.

All that was left for him to do was entrust everything to luck and flip his hidden card. His face hoped, prayed, *begged*, for total victory—no more the basic self-control expected in even a rookie dealer.

The card was a king. He then went on to draw another card—queen. Total twenty-five. Bust.

John's face erupted in nuclear fury as he watched Shell silently paying out to Balot. His face turned black.

Balot waited for her next move, gauging her timing perfectly.

She snapped one of the golden chips into place on the table. The sound was like a judge's gavel when judgment was passed down. Shell and John sprang to attention.

The air was icy with tension. Balot said and did nothing, waiting silently for her next card.

It felt good to be able to stare down an opponent without having to say anything—particularly an opponent to whom Balot had nothing to say.

Shell's blood was as thick as molten wax as he forced his hand over to the card shoe to deal. As he dealt, his fingers withdrew one of the cards and dealt the one just below it, out of turn, so that he received a card that was meant for Balot. A blatant switch.

Ashley and Bell Wing saw right through the clumsy maneuver, as did Balot.

The upcard was an ace. Balot's cards were a king and jack.

–***Stay***, Balot called immediately.

Shell flipped over his hidden card with his leaden hand.

The card was a 4. Total fifteen. He went on to draw a 7. The ace in his hand was now worth only one, bringing his hand to twelve.

Then he drew a 9. He had reached his total of twenty-one. Shell had won.

–Never* doubt. *It's the road to ruin.

Shell looked up at Balot, confused.

–The recipient of love shouldn't have any doubts. No need to trouble yourself with questions.

Behind Shell, John chuckled to himself.

Shell collected the golden chip with hands that couldn't quite stop quavering, then took in the cards for the discard pile.

Shell understood all too well what had just happened. The way the cards had been dealt was ace, king, 4, jack, 7, 9.

In other words, before his switch the cards had been arranged king, ace, 4, jack, 7, 9.

Had Shell not made his move, Balot would have had blackjack, and not just any old blackjack. The ace and jack of spades: a payout of 11 to 1. Her million-dollar stake at that level of payout would have been an atomic bomb, blowing the casino to pieces.

Then it hit Shell; he had worked it all out. Where *exactly* Balot had inserted the red marker: right below the ace that had just been dealt. She had known exactly how and where he was going to cut and based her own play around that.

Shell was completely under her thumb. She'd even planned exactly how he was going to win, forcing his hand, quite literally. He felt a deep malaise welling up inside himself. He was on the verge of screaming as his pride and confidence were ripped to shreds.

John, on the other hand, was delighted to see the golden chip return to its box, welcoming it home like it had been his own kidnapped daughter released from incarceration. Hardly surprising, considering the chip represented his own dirty money.

It wasn't even so much the money itself that was at stake for John and Shell but the very fact of its existence. If, as a result of the transfer of large amounts of cash—a large payout, for example—they came under scrutiny from the authorities and their money-laundering scheme was discovered, it would be far more than the actual cash that John and Shell both stood to lose.

Balot's aim now was to find the right timing to lay down the final three golden chips.

She threw around more of the ten-thousand-dollar chips for the next few rounds, waiting for her next chance. Then, just as she was getting ready to place the next million-dollar chip, an old memory came to mind.

Something she had once seen on television. Aborigines—native peoples under the protection of the Commonwealth. A funeral, a wake, but a festive occasion. The aborigines had great respect for Mother Nature and celebrated a person's return to her bosom via the ceremonial slaughtering of a cow.

The reason she'd ended up watching such a program was simple: she had misheard the announcer and thought it was going to be a program about *abortion*.

Abortion, abortionist, abortive—Balot was only half paying attention to the television when she thought she heard something along those lines. She was surprised, therefore, to find out that the program was about a completely different topic.

She kept on watching, though, if for no other purpose than to try and dispel the images that her

mind had conjured up. That was how she'd learned about aborigines. *Where was she when she saw that program?* Yes, that was it—the place she'd been at before her last brothel—the Date Club, in the waiting room.

There were a number of girls working there. The clients would phone in, having seen the details on a flyer or poster, and the man in the office—reception, really—would then send out the girl that most closely matched the client's request. In between assignments the girls waited around in interminable stretches of tense boredom. The girls would do what they could to alleviate this with magazines, television, books, or by attending to their manicures. It helped blot out other, more unpleasant, thoughts.

Occasionally, though, these other thoughts would still seep through. Much in the same way that Balot ended up watching the program on aborigines—to try and take her mind off a more unpleasant thought.

The aborigines in the program didn't just revere death—they also feared it. The reporter explained that this was all tied to their deep respect for the jungle. Balot understood immediately. She could relate to the animals being offered up to nature—she knew what it meant to be a sacrificial lamb. And she knew that this was a scene that played out everywhere.

It the city, people feared one another. Society was divided into those with power and those without, and if it was social interaction that helped to dissolve that fear of each other, it was also social interaction that served up scapegoats—sacrificial victims, a necessary and inevitable function to keep society running. Balot was always hearing such stories from her customers and the other girls.

Stories of sadistic men who could only get their kicks by torturing people, or religious nutjobs who had to follow a precise set of bizarre rules in the correct sequence in order to get off, or men who selected the right girls—or boys—to fulfill their fantasies to the letter, choosing their costumes and the scenery, ordering them around like a theater director would his actors. These men may not have physically been taking machetes to the throats of their livestock, but they were doing the equivalent to the hearts and minds of thirteen-year-old girls.

The Date Club that Balot worked at was one of the better brothels—one of the safer ones, anyway. The club paid taxes, or at least the man at reception said it did. *We're virtually a public service.*

In other words, they'd covered their backs against charges of violating the protection of minors law.

Those places that operated under the radar, avoiding such "unnecessary expenses" as taxes—it stood to reason that these were the most dangerous of all.

The pimps weren't always strangers, either. One of the girls, before she worked at the Date Club, used to be pimped out by her father on a regular basis. She'd already been with nearly a hundred johns by the time she was sixteen—most of her "clients" being his friends, drinking buddies, or customers at the watering holes her father frequented. Then one day her father found himself in deep trouble with one of her clients and mysteriously disappeared from the world. The girl carried on living, surviving, through the profession that her father had taught her so well. As if that was her way of showing her filial love and devotion.

At the club the girls swapped gruesome stories of how girls who plied their wares from street corners had a tendency to meet a bad end. One girl recounted to Balot a particular tale as if she were talking about a horror novel. How one of her friends ended up wasting away in the hospital,

her bones shattered, her body jelly. Girls beaten to death by their violent men had looked a prettier sight.

Apparently the dead girl used to refer to herself occasionally as a bomb. A ticking time bomb. Her friend only understood why when she saw the diagnostic charts at the hospital. The dying girl had AIDS and had been slowly dying from it for many years, working the streets all the while. Then the dying girl told her how she had ended up infected with such a disease. She had been raped one day on her way home from school.

Since then she had lived only for her work. For revenge. On her deathbed, she dreamed of all the bombs that she had spread, hoping they would explode in a fiery blast inside the men to whom she had successfully passed on her disease.

Then there were the girls who worked in groups to ensnare the big earners.

Not just ensnare, either—often their behavior would descend into blackmail, forcing their marks into handing over increasing amounts of money under the threat of public disclosure. The gangs often ended up getting sucked into larger criminal organizations—some girls went voluntarily, others in order to protect themselves from the backlash from the disgruntled blackmailee. The girl who told Balot this story was one of the former group, having joined a large criminal gang by choice, but she had run away shortly after realizing that she had made a mistake. *Men do understand on some level that women feel pain too*, she said, *but what they don't realize is that the pain we feel has just as much impact on us as it does on them*. Pain couldn't fight gravity and always flowed downhill toward lower ground, finding the path of least resistance. However bad life at the Date Club was, it wasn't as painful as the alternative.

Well, at least nothing like that ever happens here. This was the platitude so often used as the moral of one of the girls' horror stories—so much so that it became a cliché. The man at reception said so. The girls, who had grown so used to their jobs, said so. It became a mantra, an inoculation; so long as you spoke those words, no harm would ever befall *you*. But danger came in many shapes and sizes. It wasn't just the unknowable future that could be dangerous—sometimes danger came in the form of shadows from the past that had finally caught up with the present. Danger could grow and expand to fill any void.

There were teenage outcasts from society, man-boys with no place in the world and at their wits' end, who abducted middle school girls to use as their slaves. There were middle-aged, outwardly respectable government officials who walked past children's playgrounds at the same fixed time every day, hoping to catch a glimpse of the young children that they were sexually attracted to. There was the Peeping Tom who had focused all his attention on one girl, and when the object of his affection failed to show any gratitude for his solicitude he raped the *ungrateful bitch* before dragging her to the local registry office to forcibly marry her, at which point he was promptly apprehended by the police.

A seventeen-year-old did some babysitting on the side to earn some pocket money, and she committed unspeakably cruel atrocities to over ten different children before she was caught and the alarm raised. When asked by the district attorney what could have possibly motivated her, her honest reply was that she thought that was what *love* was. Such was the reality of how her own parents had treated her.

People who labeled themselves as sadists or fetishists operated a network. Some of them were out in the open, appearing in the media, proud and unashamed of their *otherness*, and were recognized as outcasts. Different, maybe. *Alien*, definitely. But not necessarily dangerous *per se*.

But then there were the other *aliens*—the ones who didn't go out of their way to call themselves sadists or fetishists. Not because they weren't, but because they considered themselves to be absolutely normal. They had no more humanity in them than a giant shredding machine: flick their switches in the right way and they'd rip anyone to pieces without a moment's hesitation, whether a complete stranger or their own flesh and blood.

These people weren't particularly complicated, not in terms of what they wanted out of life. Their motivations were really quite straightforward. The only thing that was at all complicated was the process that they needed to go through to get what they wanted.

Sunny side up—the good life: no worries, no boredom, no contradictions.

A desirable goal for people from all walks of life, rich or poor. Ask a child why she had run away from the Welfare Institute, ask a rapist why he repeatedly committed the most horrendous of atrocities, and the answer would be the same: *I wanted to be happy*. It was the only answer there could be.

On the program Balot had watched about the aborigines, they didn't actually show the moment the animals were slaughtered.

As is always the case on live television, they showed you up to the moment the machete was held high in the air, ready to strike. Then they cut to the scene straight after that, in which the cow was already engulfed in flame, the part where the blade ended the animal's life being excised in order to preserve the viewers' sensibilities.

Or was it to say to the viewer *You see this sort of thing every day anyway, so why should we bother showing it to you now?*

It was no more than what the viewers did—and had done to them—on a regular basis, after all.

Why did Ashley deliberately choose to enter the trunk of the car his brother died in?

It was to *know* the hand that brought the machete down. To understand the truth about the scene cut from the television program. To understand what had been lost.

The thing Ashley needed to know most of all was whether he still had the will to carry on living, even after the blow had been struck.

If the whole world took to arms against each other, brandishing their machetes, would he be able to survive?

There came a point in all people's lives when their fundamental belief, their trust in the basic decency of human nature, was challenged, shattered. What Ashley needed to know was whether he would ever be able to pick up the pieces.

Balot realized that she now held a machete to her own heart. In order to discern exactly what she was made of.

And to determine which way the blade was heading. If people lived their lives under the vagaries of fate and fortune, then Balot would be the one to challenge her destiny—by working out for herself which way she needed to strike.

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"Why…why are you doing this?" Shell groaned. He couldn't keep it in any longer.

His eyes were wavering between two points: Balot's face and the third million-dollar chip,

which had just been placed in the pot as Balot's next bet.

–Never* doubt. *No need to trouble yourself with questions.

After Balot said this she waved her right hand. Lightly. *Goodbye*. Then she mimed closing the door on him. Just like Shell once did to her. Shell didn't understand what any of her charade meant, exactly. But he *did* understand, in a vague and uneasy way, just quite how serious was the crime he had committed.

"Are you saying that I somehow took advantage of you? Used you? For *what,* exactly? This is crazy! I've even forgotten your face, what you look like…"

Balot tapped the table to show her impatience for her next card.

She knew that Shell had just spoken the truth. She had no problem with that. If Shell wanted to believe that he was innocent, let him believe that he was innocent—for now. All Balot knew was that she had to do what she had to do to this man who treated his own memories as so many bargaining chips.

The upcard was a king. Balot's cards were 5 and 6.

Balot hit and drew an 8, at which point she stayed.

Shell just shook his head and turned his card over.

Another ace. A glorious victory for Shell.

"I… I just wanted to help you. I gave you what you wanted. I even had a proper citizen's ID made for you, one with a decent past, not the one you had. I *saved* you…"

This was Shell's last-gasp effort at explaining his actions. It was his lawyers who had come up with this plan. Just as the Doctor had come up with Balot's. Shell was very satisfied with this story as an explanation. Balot's very existence was a thorn in his side; she was like the one viewer who burst out laughing at the most inappropriate moment at the screening of a serious movie. *She was ruining everything!*

How was he to deal with such a person?

There was only one possible answer. *Silence* her. That was the reason Shell kept a permanent roster of assassins in his pay.

Shell yearned for drama, *romance*, to fill the gaping hole that was left in him when he obliterated his memories. He wanted someone to console him, soothe the pain of the death of that part of him, to make the whole sordid process seem beautiful. And he had *chosen* Balot for this role.

The problem was that Oeufcoque had also chosen Balot. So that Oeufcoque could fight. To find meaning in his life—to fight in the hands of someone who needed to *use* him.

The little golden galloper of a mouse needed a jockey to ride him, someone who would accept him warts and all. A rider who could use him properly and at the same time appreciate him as *more* than just a mount to be used.

To Shell, on the other hand, Balot was no more than a sacrificial lamb to be offered up on the altar of his ambition. Balot had no intention of ever returning down that path.

The last of the four million-dollar chips was finally released to return home to the other side of the table. Balot threw it into the pot like she was tossing a coin down a wishing well.

The golden chip was retrieved and slammed shut into its holding box just as the red marker appeared. Game over.

Balot rose from her seat and handed her one remaining chip—a ten-thousand-dollar piece—over to the Doctor beside her.

The Doctor rolled the chip around in the palm of his hand thoughtfully, as if he'd fallen foul of the classic gambler's cliché—*If only we'd stopped when the going was good*.

A solitary ten-thousand-dollar chip. At one point they'd managed to swell their seed money of two thousand dollars by a factor of two thousand, and now this was all they had left.

The Doctor did the only thing that anyone with an ounce of adventure in them could do. "I wonder if we could keep this chip as a souvenir?"

Ashley smiled. "Well, since you've come this far…" He glanced at Shell's face to get the house's permission. He gave it, and as he now had his hands full with a reinvigorated Cleanwill John October instead of the feared nuclear meltdown, he was now radiating electricity.

"That should be fine, sir. Do feel free to take it as a memento of today's great battle," Ashley said respectfully, and the Doctor clutched the chip tight in his hands for all on the floor to see.

The Doctor's act, and indeed the whole play, was now brought to a close. This was the climax.

"I wonder if I might be permitted to walk you to the casino entrance?" asked Ashley. Bell Wing stood beside him, silently asking the same question.

Balot accepted their offer wordlessly and graciously. The Doctor, too, gave his tacit consent.

The four of them left the VIP room, watched by a throng of other customers and dealers.

"Do you have any concerns about finding your way home?" Ashley asked. *Shall I show you another route?* he was asking. *A hidden escape route?*

"Thanks for the offer, but we had all that double-checked before we arrived." The Doctor confirmed that it had all been cleared in advance with the limousine company, and that Ashley need not worry. Ashley shrugged his shoulders, impressed as ever with the thoroughness of the Doctor's preparations.

"Really, anyone would think you were a pair of professional bank robbers," he added.

Eventually the four of them stopped in front of the somewhat surreal intersection between the casino and the hotel.

Balot looked straight into Bell Wing's face. Her eyes asked whether they would ever be able to meet again.

"I'll still be a croupier and I'll carry on spinning the wheel. Not here, but some other casino. That's not for you to worry about. If you do feel like it then I'd welcome a visit from you anytime."

–Thank you. And goodbye.

"Sure, goodbye," said Ashley.

"Goodbye," said Bell Wing.

–Just wait a minute!

Shell's voice was on the other end of the cell phone. He sounded like a swimmer confronted by the sudden appearance of a fin right in front of his face.

Boiled was pressing down on the gas pedal so hard that it almost burrowed into the floor of the car. He sped down the highway, one hand on the wheel, the other holding Shell's voice to his ear.

"You've had your capital returned to you, haven't you? You still have the source of the trade you're planning?"

–It's not that. Something's wrong. How can I put it—I don't feel any better.

"Better?"

–It's as if they deliberately gave it all back to me for some reason…

"I need their location. Set someone on their tail, and I'll take care of the rest." Boiled's voice was as unconcerned as ever, and he spoke with crushing finality. *I know all I need to know,* he was saying.

–Please. Boiled. Make them disappear. Make everything disappear. I want my flashbacks gone.

"I understand. That's my *usefulness*, after all."

Boiled cut the call. With the same hand he activated the FrontView Screen. Normally it wouldn't come on except to warn him that he was over the speed limit, but now a translucent light display flashed up, displaying a map of the casino and its environs and Boiled's current location.

"I know your escape route—Oeufcoque."

A red line extended from the casino to display a predicted route. A blue line extended from the marker signifying Boiled's location, and the line stretched ahead until it intersected with the red line, running parallel with it thereafter.

Just then the other side of the FrontView Screen was splashed by a drop of water. For one moment Boiled's attention turned not to the screen nor even the highway beyond it, but up to the skies.

Scattered droplets of rain soon turned into a sheer downpour, millions of lines streaking down the windshield.

Boiled's eyes turned back to the road. Unconsciously, his mouth started forming words.

"*Curiosity*—that's right. I wanted to use you, to see what it would be like…"

It was hard to believe, but true. Boiled's hand went up to his chest, as if he were trying to physically suppress the confusion rising up inside him.

For a moment, he couldn't cope, and the bewildering sensation of not *knowing* himself spread across his face.

The unstoppable feeling rose to his throat, stuck there, and then eventually erupted out in the form of a thunderous laugh. There was no trace of humor in his voice, no sign of the milk of human kindness showing in his face, and yet he laughed and laughed and laughed.

The windows trembled. The roaring laughter continued. Real thunder, now, and lightning could be seen on the other side of the windshield, amid the ever-thickening downpour.

Boiled continued to laugh, the primeval sound echoing into the night. “Oeufcoque! I wanted to use you! Just use you!” He was exploding. Every bit as terrifying as the thunder outside.

And unstoppable. “That’s *my* usefulness! That’s right, *that’s my usefulness! To get back what I’ve lost in life, to make up for everything I’ve done!* Come back to me, Oeufcoque. I’m going to give you *my own usefulness*!”

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“Let’s go home.” Oeufcoque spoke from Balot’s right hand after she’d put the gloves back on.

A gentle shower of rain fell on them. Balot felt the rain through her gloves. What she didn’t feel was any strong sense of victory. All she felt was a shaky sense of relief.

The red convertible’s sensors had picked up on the rain, and by the time Balot arrived at the car park the car was covered by the roof that had automatically emerged from the rear side.

“You haven’t forgotten anything, have you?” the Doctor asked with a gentle smile, and Balot waved her hand to say she hadn’t.

Inside her gloves, pressed against her flesh, were the four chips, safely packed away.

“We don’t touch the whites or the shells. Just the yolk,” the Doctor said, inserting the key into the ignition. Balot fastened her seat belt.

The car drove off. Balot closed her eyes and tuned in to her surroundings.

No one was following them. All pursuers were scattered. That much was confirmed.

The Doctor had prepared a triple-layered smokescreen to throw any potential tails firmly off their scent. The first was the airport hotel, the second the limousine.

The third was the complimentary passes to the hotel suites. The tickets they’d won when Balot hit her royal straight flush at poker. They had checked into their free rooms, then Balot and the Doctor had taken separate elevators, Balot saying she would head straight to the room to rest, her elevator heading up, and the Doctor saying he’d kill a little more time wandering around the amusements below, his elevator heading down.

In reality, though, neither elevator moved at all. Balot had *snarced* the controls of the elevators to make the display lights move, but when the elevators “arrived” at their respective floors, what really happened was that both elevators opened back up exactly where they had started, and the Doctor and Balot emerged together to head straight for the car park.

Shell’s hired muscle might have been looking for them, but just as the contents of Shell’s mind had proven so elusive, the Doctor didn’t intend to be tracked down easily.

Protected by their multi-layered smokescreen, Balot and the Doctor sped off in the red convertible, taking a direct route to the official rendezvous point with the Humpty.

Balot was drifting about inside her own boundless consciousness. Her body was starting to itch all over, and whenever she touched the source of the irritation her skin would flake off in silver flecks. It was as if her body were trying to shed its shell. Her body wanted to get out of its own skin.

“Hey, do you need to take it easy? You can put the seat back and rest if you need to, you know.” The Doctor’s voice was noticeably concerned.

Balot didn’t even answer. She just did as he suggested. She lay down, closed her eyes, and felt

the warm breeze from the car's heaters wash over her.

"Danger! Something's coming, I can smell it!" Oeufcoque yelled suddenly. Balot snapped her seat belt off.

Her seat still in its reclining position, she sat bolt upright and tuned in to the car's surroundings.

"Impossible! Where, Oeufcoque?" the Doctor cried. Outside, water poured down from the skies. The red car sped through the rain at well over a hundred kilometers an hour. They had already entered the highway, and traffic was sparse, with no obvious sign of pursuers.

Then, amid the storm, a single car cut in violently just behind them.

The car had emerged from one of the motel parking lots that were often found along the highway. The Doctor's view of the feeder lane had been blocked by the high-rise buildings to the side of the road, and the pursuer had judged his timing perfectly, appearing right behind the red convertible, and was now on its tail.

The Doctor cursed and stepped on the gas. Balot had been inching toward the rear seats, and the sudden burst of acceleration threw her all the way back. She slammed into the seat, then turned to look out the rear window.

She could see the car, a mere ten meters behind them. She could almost see the aura of intent emanating from it.

"Is it Boiled?" the Doctor shouted. Neither Balot nor Oeufcoque answered. Their silence said it all.

In desperation the Doctor plunged the gas pedal to the floor. The red convertible sped up to full speed, tearing down the road.

But the predator had its prey in sight and was not about to be shaken off quite so easily.

"Looks like we're going to have to fight him off. Balot—" Oeufcoque said calmly.

But the Doctor cut in, exasperated. "You're at your limit!"

Balot turned to look at the Doctor, surprised at his vehemence. The Doctor stared back at her —and Oeufcoque—his eyes like those of a doctor ordering a liver cancer patient not to touch another drink, lest it turn out to be his last.

"I'm saying this as your personal physician! You're completely at your limit—"

But he was interrupted by a crash. Like one of the rear passenger doors had been kicked in, hard. One of the side mirrors flew off the car, heading for the shoulder but then smashing into fragments along the highway.

"The windows and tires are a hundred-percent bulletproof. They're not about to be troubled by any old gun. We'll be able to hold it for a while."

The very next instant a soul-chilling shock ran through the car and the rear window went white.

The problem was that Boiled's gun was *not* any old gun. It was practically a portable artillery cannon. It fired shot after shot at the back of the car, crushing the trunk, sending sparks flying off the rear wheels, causing the whole car to swerve. The gunfire stopped for a moment.

Balot continued to spread her senses, to grasp what was happening. The two cars were fewer than five meters apart. Boiled was the only one inside the car behind them. Suddenly, Boiled's car veered to the right and sped up.

He had finished reloading. Balot sensed Boiled's car lining up next to theirs, Boiled taking aim with his right arm, judging the distance. The next instant, a roar.

Right at that moment the convertible swerved sharply to the left.

Boiled's bullet grazed the taillight, then disappeared into the night.

"Balot!" It was the Doctor shouting. He was the one in the driver's seat, but he understood immediately what had happened. *Balot was driving.*

–Just duck down. We'll be okay. Just keep your body low.

Balot *snarced* the car stereo to communicate, and it obeyed her will, as did the rest of the car.

The steering wheel was spinning every which way right in front of the Doctor's eyes. Only for a moment, though; it soon sank into the front panel, becoming one with the chassis. The Autodrive function engaged.

While the Doctor sat there in shock, Balot maneuvered the car to avoid the bullets. Three she dodged completely, one grazed the edge of the car roof, and one smashed into the taillight.

Balot had positioned the car deliberately to take this hit. The fragments of the lamp flew into Boiled's windshield. Balot used this to measure the distance between the two cars, like a boxer's jabs to probe how far there was between himself and his opponent.

Boiled went to reload his gun, and as he did so Balot unleashed the true potential of the convertible's engine.

The tires, gears, and shaft were now all set to one single-minded purpose: *speed*.

The speed of the red convertible leapt up another notch. They were now roaring down the highway toward the outskirts of the city at a speed of over two hundred kilometers an hour. Balot felt her consciousness expanding and becoming ever more sensitive to her surroundings. The car groaned as it pushed on past its limit, and Balot seemed to moan along in sympathy.

Another shock. Not a bullet, this time, but rather the impact of Boiled's car smashing into the side of theirs.

The red convertible shuddered. Its suspension screamed. The pressure was incredible. And Boiled's aim was to take advantage of the moment when the pressure became too much—once Balot lost concentration, that was it, and the red convertible would be no more than a sitting duck.

The Doctor realized this. As did Oeufcoque, who said, "Balot, *use* me!"

Balot felt a faint glow of warmth in her right hand.

Balot hesitated. This was her hand—the hand that had once abused Oeufcoque so. Was she now supposed to forget about that and use him again? She felt the pressure more acutely than ever.

Balot's eyes met with the deep red in Oeufcoque's.

Balot closed her eyes. She felt Oeufcoque's warm body heat and prayed for something to protect her. Just like when she first took Oeufcoque in her hands, all that while ago. Oeufcoque *turned* with a squelch. She felt a reassuring weight in her hands and a trigger against her finger.

"Don't, Balot! You're too—" The Doctor's words were dissipated by a sharp gust of wind. The car roof was opening up, and the Doctor could only gape at it. The rain came down, assaulting them like razor blades.

Balot felt an extraordinary sense of *precision* amid the lashing rain and the car that was now pushing three hundred kilometers an hour. She was *in control*. She *grasped* the two cars. Their strengths and their Achilles' heels. She sensed the currents of the violent winds and the raindrops that spiraled all around. The direction the two cars were heading in. Her movements. Boiled's movements. She sensed everything as one, with perfect timing. Her whole world turned bright white.

Balot's eyes became bloodshot, and she noticed her skin pressing in tightly on her internal organs. She heard a ringing noise around her forehead, and then could hear no more. The only

body part left to rely on was her heart, which kept on beating away, telling her what she needed to do.

It all happened in an instant. The two cars were side by side. Balot leapt up, opened her eyes wide, and wrapped her finger around the trigger. Amid the torrential downpour she thought she heard herself screaming, yelling with all her might with a throat that had long since lost all powers of speech.

She fired. The bullets flowed out of the gun in quick succession, meeting Boiled's salvo in midair.

Balot's first shot smashed into the bullet Boiled had fired and was obliterated. So was the second, but the third was enough to deflect the path of the oncoming bullet. The fourth went straight for Boiled's face, but was rendered harmless by Boiled's *PGF* wall, as was the fifth.

The sixth and final bullet found its target—Boiled's car.

Something ruptured right in front of Boiled's eyes. Balot's aim had been true, and she had hit the steering wheel just where she had wanted—on the spot to release the airbag. In an instant, Boiled's face and arms and body were pinned back, the air pressure from the expanding airbag pressing him into his seat.

With a yell, Boiled focused his *PGF*, forcing the airbag back far enough for him to extricate his shooting arm. He pushed his gun into the gap so that the muzzle pointed into the airbag, and fired. It exploded. The airbag shattered into a million pieces, as did the glass in the windshield.

Wind and rain and shards of glass came flying into the car, and all were reflected harmlessly off the wall of artificial gravity that Boiled generated.

On the other side of the newly created space was Balot.

The convertible was now back in front of Boiled's car, roaring away.

Boiled screamed a wordless scream and fired again.

Balot had fired first. Boiled's *PGF* was activated in self-defense, warping the flight paths of all bullets in his vicinity—including his own.

It flew up into the air, way over Balot's head.

Like the red convertible, Boiled's car was also supposed to have been utterly bulletproof. But Balot could accurately target the exact same location over and over as easily as she could walk a straight line. She fired repeatedly at the hood, hitting the same spot again and again, and this eventually opened up a bullet-sized hole in the not-so-impenetrable armor. Then Balot's final bullet flew straight through the hole and ripped the cam belt to shreds.

In an instant, Boiled's car lost the ability to convert its energy into forward momentum.

A gap opened up between the cars. Balot and Boiled both looked for an opportunity to fire, but too much space now divided them. Balot's car was still devouring the terrain voraciously, and Boiled's car could no longer keep up.

Balot and Boiled remained still lest a final chance—or need to defend—presented itself. Soon, though, it became clear that their duel had come to a close, at least for now.

Boiled jerked the steering wheel to the right, bringing his vehicle onto the shoulder beside the highway.

That very same moment the fuse in Balot's consciousness blew.

–The steering…

It was the last thing she said. As soon as she'd confirmed that the Doctor understood that he was back in the driver's seat, she collapsed across the rear passenger seat.

“Balot?” Oeufcoque called.

All Balot heard was a ringing noise. Her eyelids fluttered uncontrollably, her lungs panted—rapid and shallow—and her whole body convulsed.

“Shit, why does this girl always have to *try so hard* ! Can’t she just take it easy once in a while?” the Doctor lamented from under his rain-drenched hair. “Is this the only way she’s ever going to be able to live? To survive?”

The Doctor caught a glimpse of the Humpty up in the distance, descending from the heavens as if the moon had decided to come down with the rain.

He cried out to the celestial object.

Not so much in prayer—more to demand of the heavens that it keep its side of the bargain, now that he had kept his.

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Boiled stared out through the shattered window with dark eyes. He turned off the uselessly rotating engine, and when its noise had died down he could hear the sound of the rainfall even more keenly. Suddenly the ringtone on his cell phone decided to add to the din.

–Boiled? Are you there? Have you done it*?*

It was Shell. He had been calling incessantly throughout the whole car chase.

“They escaped. Further pursuit is impossible at this point.”

–You haven’t *done it, then?*

“They’re worthy opponents. I’d advise you to consult your lawyers to prepare for the next stage.”

–What’s that? “Worthy opponents”? You sound almost as if you’re enjoying *yourself!*

“Enjoying myself…” Boiled frowned. Shell then went on to hurl a barrage of abuse at him, to which Boiled listened silently.

“What did they get away with?” Boiled asked quietly, when Shell’s tirade had finally subsided.

Shell went silent. Then he started muttering in a tone completely different from his previous one.

–“What,” you ask? How can I possibly explain that… I’ve long since forgotten myself.

With that, Shell terminated the call.

Phone still in his hand, Boiled called for a tow truck and a replacement vehicle. He then got out of the car and looked up to the sky with his steely eyes.

“Rune-Balot.”

He spoke the name out loud, as if he had just heard it for the very first time.

04

"She has a terrible fever. It seems that the fibers have started developing abnormally quickly, and this is affecting her own metabolic system."

The Doctor hadn't wasted a second. The instant they'd clambered aboard the Humpty Dumpty, he'd laid Balot flat out on a table, disinfected his own hands in the dining room, then prepared his equipment. Medical apparatuses, bundles of towels, his computer, his spectacle-monitor, biorhythmic diagnostics—and Oeufcoque.

"We'll take preventative measures immediately. Wrap her up, Oeufcoque. Just like when we first saved her."

"Got it."

The Doctor rushed to clear the chairs out from under the table and made some space beside Balot on the table.

Oeufcoque jumped down onto the cleared space, *turning* with a squelch as he did so.

The Doctor nimbly took a pair of scissors in his hand and asked, "Did she like these much?"

"Like what?"

"These clothes!"

"I think so."

"Well, looks like you'll have to make her another set." The Doctor had already cut the dress open from the hem at Balot's ankles up to her chest.

With the utmost care, the Doctor went on to cut the dress off her at the shoulders, and then he cut the waistband on her underwear. Balot's chest swelled up instantly, and a heavy breath escaped her lips. Those lips were now trembling along with her arms and legs, and all were covered in silvery fibrous threads.

The Doctor took a towel in his hands and poured a liberal helping of antiseptic onto it before patting Balot's body down gently, as if he were treating a burn victim, peeling off the rest of her clothes as he went along.

"Excellent. Her skin isn't sticking to her clothing. No signs of peeling or hemostasis either. She really is developing most impressively. I wonder if some of the fibers have moved into her blood cells and are absorbing all the iron there…"

Before long, the towel that the Doctor used to wipe Balot's body was covered in silvery powder. He discarded the towel on the floor and prepared the next one. He used this to wipe down Balot's brow, the back of her neck, her armpits, and all the major joints. Finally, he cried out in joy, like a prospector finding gold.

"Wonderful! She started perspiring again! There I was worried that she was just turning into a lump of metal!"

All the while, Oeufcoque had finished turning. He was now an all-purpose medical pod, the pinnacle of human technological and engineering prowess. Turning into a gun was child's play compared to this. The Doctor lifted Balot up off the table with surprising strength—the situation required it, so he just did it unblinkingly—and placed her gently into the pod.

"The preventative measure that the girl needs most of all right now is to eliminate excess stimuli. Wrap her up in a hermetic seal."

The pod responded immediately to the Doctor's instructions and started filling up with white bubbles to envelop Balot's body.

The Doctor quickly double-checked that Balot's airway was connected to the respirator and covered her ear holes and eyelids with a protective gel before fixing Balot into position. The bubbles moved to cover her completely.

"The fibers have started developing out of control, right, Doctor?"

"Not exactly, no—they're developing just as the girl wants. The rate of development might seem abnormal to us, but as far as Balot's body is concerned, everything's going according to plan." The Doctor wiped her right arm down and prepared her intravenous drip. "What we need to do now is make sure we have adequate preventative measures in place to keep things from getting out of hand. Help bring a semblance of normality back into the poor girl's life. Show the aimlessly meandering runner that *the goal is in sight*. In order for us to do that, you'll need to consider yourself attached at the hip to her."

"Attached at the hip?"

"Stay inside the pod with her, I mean. She'll feel so much better knowing that it's *you* she's inside, not just some machine. I'll feel better too." The Doctor fixed the intravenous solution to the wall of the pod.

Then, just at the point when all there was left to do was sit back and wait, Oeufcoque screamed out in panic, "Balot's responsiveness is fading! What should I do? Doctor!"

"Just stop trying to *make* her respond," the Doctor said, nonplussed. Oeufcoque was at a loss for words.

"Let's just allow her to rest," the Doctor continued more gently. "She's survived so far, hasn't she? Using her own strength?"

The Doctor tapped the pod lightly to provide reassurance—to Oeufcoque, not Balot.

"I'm just going to transfer the data from the chips we won onto another drive, then get some sleep myself. We've still got a long road ahead of us, after all. Our next task is to go through all the memories of a man—and a serial killer at that." The Doctor looked at Balot as she slept inside the pod. "Let's just pray that they hold the key to victory for the girl."

Balot slept for nearly twenty hours solid, cocooned by the white bubbles, her lungs pushed onward by the respirator.

She didn't dream. The time simply disappeared.

She remembered pulling the trigger on the gun, then found herself inside a pod.

When she awoke, Balot found that she felt absolutely fine. Indeed, the whole world seemed clearer to her than it had ever been.

It was a peaceful existence inside the Humpty—the very definition of tranquility, if you ignored the Doctor's constant clatter as he processed the data and sent and received emails to and from the DA's office.

It was in these serene surroundings that the pieces to the puzzle all started to fall into place for Balot.

She got a glimpse of the yolk of one man, rotten to the core.

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Balot stared up at the ceiling from her easy chair.

She felt as calm and composed as she had when she first woke up back at the original hideaway.

Her body was covered in a figure-hugging black outfit. *Made by Oeufcoque*. Virtually identical to the one she had worn for target practice. The only difference was that there were now a number of electronic terminals attached to her body, connected by a multitude of cords that spread out from the center of her body in all directions, winding their way back to machinery shoved into a cramped corner of the dining room.

"It's not enough for us just to analyze Shell's memories to prove *what* he did *when*," the Doctor said over the clutter on the table. "In order for it to stand up in court as proof, we need to also replay his thoughts and emotions—we need to establish the *process* as much as the actual results of his actions. This is a mammoth undertaking, really, and would normally take the best part of half a year, but I'm sure you and Oeufcoque will be able to work it out in less than a day."

At this point the Doctor took his eyes off the screen and looked at Balot. "Now, are you really all right with this?"

Balot slowly lifted her head up from its relaxed position on the easy chair and looked straight at the Doctor.

–I want to know the answer.* Why me? *As long as I can get just a little bit closer to the answer, I'll be satisfied.

She *snarced* the electronic voice box built into her suit. The Doctor's eyes turned to it—to *him*.

"Make sure you filter out any material that's too inappropriate, right, Oeufcoque? Anything too shocking and we'll end up in violation of the protection of minors law ourselves."

"Balot's plenty sensible and mature about this, Doc. She's the one who got the chips, after all. If she wants to see what's inside them, we shouldn't keep it from her."

The Doctor scratched his head when confronted with Oeufcoque's intractable bluntness. "It's just that we had a warning from the DA. He told us to make sure we take into consideration the reactions from the Women's Institute and other educational charities…"

Still in her prone state, Balot shrugged her shoulders. Why should the WI or the children's charities care *now* if she was exposed, secondhand, to sex and violence? They couldn't have cared less when they were the ones exposing her to it firsthand.

"It's precisely because the laws of the land designed to protect minors *didn't* protect her that Balot's here with us today, Doc." Oeufcoque seemed as unconcerned as Balot by the wrath of the do-gooders. "Besides, this is what *Mardock Scramble 09* was made for. Balot wants to know why she was killed. It's what she needs to do in order to move on and live again. No one trying to obstruct that has any claim on us—this is firmly outside their jurisdiction."

The Doctor shrugged. It wasn't as though he actually cared about the DA's request, anyway.

–Don't worry. I'll be all right, 'cause Oeufcoque will be with me the whole time.

Balot smiled, and the Doctor couldn't help but smile back. "So, even little half-baked Oeufcoque ends up getting cooked in an instant under the spell of the girl."

"I'm just trying to do the right thing, based on what we know about her abilities and her feelings."

"No need to go all red—I'm only teasing you! Are you blushing, my wishy-washy little friend?" the Doctor interrupted Oeufcoque, who was about to come to a spluttering halt anyway,

and then turned toward the monitor. “Now, let’s break some eggs. All set?”

A piece of machinery in the dining room that looked like a large refrigerator started grinding away.

It was a machine that the Doctor and Oeufcoque had built together, designed specifically for the purpose of extracting Shell’s memories from the four chips. The idea was that Oeufcoque digested the raw data, processed it, and fed it to Balot, who physicalized the data into a form that could be recorded by the machine.

Balot snuggled deep into her easy chair and closed her eyes.

She experienced a different feeling from the time when she’d fixed her fake ID at the café with Oeufcoque, and one also distinct from her swim through the pool of information back at Paradise.

Her task now was to *relive*, as much as was possible, the life of another human being, selecting only the most pertinent pieces of information.

The first thing she heard was a voice. A low speaking voice. The sound swelled, dissonant and echoing all around her head, until it finally burst deep inside her, leaving only silence in its wake.

Balot’s ears pricked up, and she realized that she was somewhere she had never seen before.

A second later, she realized that she was standing there.

She was walking toward someplace. She seemed to be in the pleasure quarter of Mardock City. She came across a girl she had never seen before. A blonde, fourteen or fifteen.

The girl said something. Balot said something back to the girl.

For a moment a Blue Diamond sparkled *inside the girl’s breast.* An image of the rings on the right hand. The index finger on the right hand swelled up, and Balot saw playing cards and cars and drinks.

What number was this girl? Was she Shell’s first? Memories flooded her head, and Balot realized that the girl in front of her was indeed one that Shell had bought. At that same moment the girl started speaking. Balot couldn’t make out what the girl was saying; there was too much noise, too many other voices. Eventually the distractions subsided, and Balot could discern a number of phrases, snatches of conversation.

“I don’t want to go back to my father’s house,” the blonde girl said. Her voice was urgent. Balot felt overwhelmed by empathy.

“Please, don’t make me go back to my father.”

“Of course not. I’ll protect you, my little one. I’ll take you to a safe place. You’re beautiful. And you’re about to become even more beautiful.” *A surge of empathy welled up inside him.* Suppressed, over and over, many times. A crystal. The luster of a Blue Diamond. Then a great loss befalls both, all turns to dust. The *processing* commences.

The memory faded, and the jewel replaced it. The inevitable ritual that accompanied the death of memory.

The urge always appeared after a similar event—it was triggered by something. The death of a girl, murder dressed as suicide. *Why me?* The answer was sinking into the depths. A flashback that was doomed to wander through eternity, unknown and unknowable by anybody.

–Balot, stay conscious. This is all virtual reality.

Balot nodded in her own mind and started to strip the first memory of all excess information, peeling away the fat. She realized that more and more information was welling up in its place. Memories of sounds, light, pain. Memories of anger, pleasure, conversations. These emotions cut across the scene and the motives and intentions of the *feeler* started to form distinct, tangible

shapes.

"Excellent! We're starting to establish concrete proof of Shell's emotional state…"

It was the Doctor, speaking from somewhere. It was the last thing Balot heard from the real world. Instead, fragments of information that had been submerged in the morass of the dark abyss were now bubbling up and assaulting all of Balot's senses, penetrating through her skin.

–You need to organize all this information into some kind of system, Balot. At the moment, none of it makes sense. Return to the starting place and try again.

Suddenly the cityscape of Mardock City unfolded before her eyes again. First office blocks at noon, then the dark shantytowns of the slums, then a casino kiosk, a place to hold business transactions with persons unknown.

Memories of the sweet rush of success that accompanied the first ride in the AirCar. A number of girls were plucked from the pool of memory and held in front of her, appearing one by one in front of her eyes.

The girls were standing on a bridge, silent, eyes closed. Wind blowing in from the sea. The shadow underfoot crept and then rushed in, and night fell. Eventually each of the memories fell into place, and the girls opened their eyes.

The girls all had Blue Diamonds for eyes. Balot shrieked in surprise.

One of the girls started walking backward across the bridge, as if she were in a movie and somebody had pressed the rewind button.

Balot followed after her. When she arrived at the bridge she saw the bright lights of the city on the other side. A casino shone out like a beacon of light, and all around it tall buildings, houses, garages, all engraved with the symbol of OctoberCorp.

A new image floated up: brain surgery. A young boy on the operating table. The girl that Balot had been chasing was now walking around the table in circles. The girl's mouth popped open and from it spewed forth the grating sound of a saw against a skull bone. Something was removed, something was transplanted in its place. Of course, the chip inside the brain was also firmly engraved with the ubiquitous OctoberCorp symbol. *The reason I chose this casino to hold my Shows? Doesn't a salmon return upstream in order to spawn?*

"There's nowhere I want to return home to," said the girl, over the sound of the cranial saw. "But I wish I had someplace that I *wanted* to return home to."

"Leave it to me. Come home with me."

Then the girl died of an overdose.

That's a lie, cried the world. A lethal dose of drugs would have been wasted on her. Death by narcotic misadventure? Merely a pretext, a facade for the public. He had just strangled her as she slept. This was the last time he would strangle anyone to death. Too much hassle, too much to tidy up afterwards. His headaches just got worse and worse.

Stress. He needed something that gave him absolute, total euphoria. Heroic Pills were perfect.

You walk the path of unhappiness. That's right. A vision of a large man. Something bad will happen all around you before too long. Trouble. That's what the man said. If *Mardock Scramble 09* is called, I'll have far greater jurisdiction than any public organization. The ultimate bodyguard.

–Boiled must have known that the Doctor and I were on Shell's tail. That's why he arranged to be in Shell's employ just before the case started. These memories are from around that time…

Psychelaundering. In order to understand my business practices, you have to understand me

first. Look at these Blue Diamonds. They're my business credentials. Seven in total. Apparently, six lives have been forfeited so far. I tried to help the girls. I tried to save them. I want to know why I'm so frightened all the time.

"Why am I so frightened?"

–Balot, stay focused on your own consciousness! You're not actually experiencing Shell's feelings yourself!

I killed one with a gun, but that wasn't very satisfying. It left a bad taste in my mouth. Guns are no good. I'll have to find another method. Memories—even when they're gone, they still affect my mind. I need to find a way to kill her while keeping my distance. And also be able to recover her remains safely. I'll trigger an explosion.

I'll use the insurance on my AirCar. Pin the blame on the girl. Make out that it was her own fault.

"Never *doubt*. It's the road to ruin."

–No, Balot. Those are your own *memories. Let's try and work through this chronologically. Begin once more.*

The third girl was an accident. So called. The brakes were tampered with.

"A moving car is no good. It confuses my memory. Memories—even when they're gone, they still affect my mind."

He'd fixed the brakes of the car, but as a result he'd been forced to look at the spectacle of her corpse, hideously deformed. She'd been traveling at 120 kilometers an hour. It would have been different had she just turned straight into ash.

Memories disappeared, but it was always a hassle arranging permits for cremations. Burial was far more common in this city, after all.

"I've thought of all sorts of ways to launder money."

I knew all about it. There were voices—two girls. *A surge of empathy welled up inside him.*

"Don't make me see my father again, please. I'll do anything you want, just don't force me to see him again."

"Don't you worry, my little one. I'll look after you. I know all about it. How much you've suffered."

Stress. It's what destroys my memories. So why not do it thoroughly? I know how. I'm going to use my stress to obliterate all traces of my memories of you. Everything's bright red. Stabbing her to death—stupid even by my own standards. Blood everywhere. The cleanup afterward—I want the Blue Diamond. Its sparkle makes everything clean, washes everything away. I must have flipped out. I killed her before I even knew what I was doing.

The memory breakdown happened right after that. Just at the time I'd failed in an attempt to launder money, but my stress was alleviated and everything was all right again. Business was booming, and my stock was rising. The secret of my success.

Having said that, it's not as if I even remember everything that happened back then.

"In order to understand my business practices, you need to understand me first."

–We need to establish whether that memory is a real one. Shell could have been watching a movie or something. We need to know for sure whether it's actually Shell…

The first one I killed? To me, each girl is *always* the first one I killed. My memories disappear, after all.

Nobody knows, and nobody will ever know. My memories will vanish entirely. I know how to

clean myself up. Maybe they'll trust me to clean their money up too.

A surge of empathy welled up inside him. The intricate fragments of memories swirled around like cards at a gaming table.

–Your sense of time is being affected, Balot. It's already been seven whole hours since we started this operation.

The first one he killed? The memories—no, the trace remnants, the vestiges of memory—were somehow different with this one. Because she was the first, the original?

When, exactly? It all kicked off after he'd entered the casino. He'd started to realize his talent at cards. I'd like you to come and watch me at the Show. I know there are years between us, but we're still a proper couple, real lovers. Even if I lost all my other memories, I'd still like to remember you. I could forget everything else, but not your face. Please.

The first one I killed was different, I think. I really meant it with her.

–Your body won't hold out much longer, Balot! It's been over ten hours now! Your stamina—

"There's something I want to tell you, and I want you to listen, Shell."

That's what the girl said. *A surge of empathy welled up inside him.* I won't forget you. It's my job to make dirty things clean again. My memories disappear. Maybe they'll trust me to clean their money up too.

"I don't want to lie to you. I want you to know the truth."

If they trust me to clean up their money, it means that they trust *me. Trust me!*

This is where it begins, my *Mardock*, my stairway to heaven. I'm going to make it clean. I'm going to make everything clean. Like a blue diamond.

"I was raped by my father."

–Balot, stay calm!

A surge of empathy welled up inside him. He was shocked. And yet his love for the girl remained the same. He loved the girl. But then there was the stress. *Flashbacks*.

"I'd rather go to jail than return there. Flashbacks."

–That's you speaking there, Balot! Doctor, we have to stop this. Doctor! Damn, Balot's snarc *is much stronger than I'd ever imagined—*

Flashbacks. Memories of sounds, light, pain. Memories of anger, pleasure, conversations. These emotions cut across the scene, gradually coming back to life, and the motives and intentions of the *feeler* started to form distinct, tangible shapes.

"I'm going to make it all clean. Everything that is dirty, I'm going to clean."

No. It wasn't like that. I didn't kill her. Not the first girl. She was already dead. Why? I'm going to make you clean. I'm going to clean you up. The whole world weeps for you. My whole world weeps for you.

Balot's eyes overflowed with tears.

"A Blue Diamond. That's the way to do it."

Shell's love was not enough. The girl died of despair. The girl had looked to Shell for salvation, she had wanted real love, but in the end she died in a state of delirium. A pathetic death. Shell was plunged into a despair of his own. Despairing at the girl's death. Despairing at the reason behind the girl's death.

The first one that Shell killed wasn't the girl. It was the person who had hurt the girl so, driven her to suicidal despair. *The girl's father.*

"The first one I killed—"

–We're past the point of no return now. We'll just have to guide Balot through to the bitter end.

The girl made Shell remember all the despair that he had once forgotten. *A surge of empathy welled up inside him.* "Don't you worry, my little one. I'll look after you. I know all about it. How much you've suffered."

Stress. It's what destroys my memories.

No, that's wrong. The first one that Shell killed wasn't the girl's father.

Suddenly Balot was assaulted by flashbacks. They were inside the vast emptiness of Shell's lost memories. Something crying out even now from the darkness.

"*Why me?* "

The despair that Shell should have forgotten all about was the sparkle in the facets of the Blue Diamonds. They scintillated, radiant.

There was a hubbub all around. Balot suddenly realized where she was—at a Show, watching Shell under the spotlight.

At first Balot thought she had come back to the beginning of his memories, but then she realized that she was holding his rings in both her hands. All with Blue Diamonds set in platinum. This was Balot's job—to look after Shell's jewelry. One of her jobs.

One of the diamonds is conspicuous, brighter than the rest, and the man calls this one *Fat Mama*, because, as he says, "I called in a favor from an acquaintance who works in *processing* to have my dead mother's ashes turned into a diamond."

–We've reached it! Finally, we're at the source of Shell's trauma!

That's right. The first one Shell killed. Shell's own mother.

A surge of empathy welled up inside him.

The despair of the girl that Shell had loved was scattered around the world. The girl understood why Shell felt such empathy with her pain. She understood why Shell had accepted her for who she was.

Shell also understood what the girl had understood. It was a vicious circle. Empathy begat empathy. The girl couldn't cope with it. It was the very thing she had run away from—

"Flashbacks—"

In the end, the girl realized that she was right back where she started. In the same place she had run away from—

–Why me?

Balot was frozen still, the answer finally staring her in the face.

Here was the *inappropriate material* that the Doctor had warned about. Image after image exploded into Balot's mind.

–Balot, don't respond to any of these! They have nothing at all to do with your own past…

This was it. Inside the rotten core of Shell's memory—that pustulent, scabrous yolk—he was forced to have sexual intercourse with his own mother. It started around the time Shell hit puberty and carried on right up to the time just before he turned twenty, when, finally, unable to bear it any longer, Shell fixed the brakes in his mother's car so that she would die and it would look like an accident and he would finally be free of her.

This was the reason Shell felt his deep surge of empathy toward all the girls he had ever killed.

It was the despair of the first girl that he had ever loved with all his heart.

This was the plain and simple answer to Balot's question.

The answer to *Why me?*

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Balot imagined that she had screamed out loud.

In fact, her mouth had been clamped tightly shut, and all she had done was sit bolt upright and open her eyes wide.

When she came to her senses, she noticed the Doctor looking over at her, bleary eyed.

"Twenty-three hours…that's how much time has passed since you first lay down there," the Doctor said weakly. Bags had formed under his eyes. Balot imagined she probably had similar shadows underneath her own eyes. Then Balot checked that she had heard what she had just heard *for herself*, and stared at the Doctor as if she were looking to him for confirmation. Suddenly she was assaulted by a terrible chill. She felt like she was about to be sucked into the corrupted whirls of memories once again.

"Focus on your breathing, Balot. One step at a time, shallow breaths. Easy does it…" Oeufcoque said. But Balot's mouth, clamped tightly shut as it was, showed no sign of wanting to open. Her jaws were locked tightly together, and she displayed the classic symptoms of heavy shock.

Balot shifted her body. She leaned forward in her easy chair and opened her mouth.

Before she had time to stop herself, to even realize what was going on, she plastered the floor with the contents of her stomach.

Her throat might have lost the power of speech, but just when she wanted it the least she found it was perfectly capable of making a series of unearthly retching sounds.

Sour liquid filled her nostrils and mouth, and the pain and discomfort caused tears to well up in her eyes.

The Doctor jumped up to comfort her, putting one hand on her back and thrusting out a towel with the other.

–I'm so sorry.

Balot just about managed to vocalize the words before grabbing the towel and burying her face in it. She was crying silently now. Everything was so unpleasant, so frustrating, so sad.

–I've made the floor all dirty…

The moment she said the words the corrupted memories started coming back to her again, triggered by the word *dirty. I'm going to make you clean. That's my job. Into a Blue Diamond. That's the answer. I'm going to make you clean. Clean you up.*

"Try not to panic. You'll settle down soon enough. You're just a bit frazzled from all your labors," said the Doctor's voice, nearby. Suddenly, she realized that something was being injected into her arm. "Tranquilizers and sleeping pills. You'll be asleep in no time. You've done well, really well. Take it easy now. You won't have any more nightmares. Oeufcoque will be here right next to you. Won't you, Oeufcoque?"

Oeufcoque was wrapped around her tightly as her bodysuit, and he said something in response.

Right here—or something like that. As Balot's awareness grew dimmer, she thought she saw

the face of the girl who was killed by despair. She wondered what it was exactly that girl had wanted from Shell.

Probably the same as me, Balot thought. *The same sort of answer as the one I wanted. A simple answer. Why me? Because I love you.* The girl had probably thought all that mattered was *to be loved*. And, as a result, she ended up *burnt out*.

Balot slowly closed her eyes. She felt all her sorrows dissipate. The other person's memories were no more—they had disappeared, silently—and Balot began to regain her confidence and started to believe for certain that she was now *the only one*.

Balot felt her whole body aching for the being that now wrapped her up in a warm cocoon, and she fell asleep.

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When Balot woke again, she was a little surprised to find herself in bed wearing pajamas. She sensed that her pajama top was connected to her pants, and then realized that they were in fact Oeufcoque. There was an intravenous drip in her arm. Careful not to dislodge the tubing, Balot hugged her pajamas tightly, wrapping her arms around her knees. She stayed like that for a while, not thinking, just crying.

Oeufcoque stayed with her, silently keeping her company.

When finally she got out of bed and headed into the dining room, she found that the various contraptions had all been tidied away.

The Doctor had just finished sending his latest email to the DA, and he spun around to greet Balot with the words, "We have a date for the trial."

And so it came to pass that, one week after she had obtained the chips from the casino, Balot found herself standing in front of the Broilerhouse again.

In order to climb her own stairway to heaven. The symbol of this city. *Mardock*.

Chapter 12

NAVIGATION

01

"Why am I here?" Shell repeated the words to himself over and over, muttering in a state of near delirium.

Boiled watched with steely eyes as Shell sat there on the bench, head in his hands. The two of them were the only ones currently in the Broilerhouse waiting room. Shell removed his Chameleon Sunglasses. Holding the deep violet sunglasses in his hand, he turned to Boiled, his voice a pitiful mess of self-recrimination. *He should have worked it out long ago.*

"If only I'd told you everything right from the beginning, none of this would have happened… I was a fool to imagine that it would be easy to kill the girl."

Boiled sat there. He didn't make a sound; his expression remained constant. He didn't nod and he didn't shake his head.

"I can change. I can become anyone you want me to be. I can clean up any dirt. I'll make the best of any situation. So, please, just *get me out of here,*" Shell continued.

Boiled crossed his legs and met Shell's gaze. Still he said nothing.

"I'm frightened, Boiled, and I have absolutely no idea what it is that frightens me so. That's the worst part of it." Shell sounded as if he were about to burst, his innards ready to spill out of him at any moment.

"I'll make everything disappear," Boiled replied, his voice soft.

Shell's eyes, so full of pain and distress, opened up ever so slightly.

"It's time to talk to your lawyers," Boiled continued and started to rise, when Shell clamped his hand on Boiled's arm.

"I'm begging you… Help me… Help me become a different person again."

Boiled nodded.

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"So it was a matricide, after all…" the Doctor said. His face was calm, almost respectful. "That must have been the root of all his deviant behavior. Despite losing his memories—no, *because* he's lost his memories—he was left with no other way to control his emotions, to keep his urges in check."

–Why?

Balot *snarced* the words through the choker on her neck, Oeufcoque.

"Imagine that you're experiencing constant feelings of terrible fear and anger and have absolutely no idea how to deal with those emotions—you have no idea what will help you calm down. *Then* you'll get a sense of what it is to be Shell. Wouldn't you do whatever you could to try and stop the terrifying feelings that are gnawing away at your mind? Sure, you'd be fine so long as you could find a way to successfully sublimate those feelings—in your professional and social ambitions, maybe—but what happens when you're *no longer* able to sublimate the urges? Self-restraint goes out the window."

"And as Shell grew used to the whole process, he became inured to it and started to believe

that what he was doing was entirely normal," added Oeufcoque, now taking the shape of a geometric pattern inside the crystal pendant on the choker. "It was probably a self-defense mechanism against his memory loss. He was afraid of the spirit of his dead mother coming back to haunt him, but even stronger than that was the feeling that he was responsible for the girls' deaths, that their sacrifice was all his fault."

–Because his first lover died, I think.

Balot found herself contributing to the conversation.

–The girl that Shell really did love. It was a real shock to him to find out that she had an abusive past, similar to his. A shock to discover that they might have chosen one another because of their similar histories.

Balot felt a pang of sadness in her chest. Sure, she felt uncomfortable and irritated too, but the feeling of sorrow was winning out over all other emotions. She hadn't imagined for a moment that Shell had lived through experiences similar to her own. On the contrary, Shell had always looked for such girls in order to convert them into that which was beautiful to him—Blue Diamonds, money, the stairway to *success*.

I'm going to make you clean. I'm going to clean you up. When Shell had first yelled this out, it was as a lonely soul, but also as a kindred spirit. *Burnt out* and wanting others to join him.

"Empathy, eh? Well, people do indeed actively seek out people like themselves—birds of a feather…" the Doctor murmured. Then he coughed, conscious that the mood had been brought down somewhat. "Anyhow, all the memories we copied from the chips have already been submitted to the Broilerhouse as evidence. All we have to do now is wait for the DA to start moving, and then we hit them with a chronological simulation of Shell's memories. It'll be just like fingerprinting him. Our aim for today's trial is to get official recognition that this will serve as proof of Shell's crimes."

–What's my role in all this?

"You're here as a preemptive gag, as it were, to stop Shell from speaking too much and trying to deny everything. Don't worry, this trial won't be anything like the last one. The only person who needs to worry is Shell—he may have been laughing last time, but he's certainly not going to see the funny side of this one. Not only will his past be dragged up for all to see and judge, he won't even remember it for himself."

–Not even the memory of killing his own mother?

"He was only about eighteen years old at the time, and we know that he killed his mother in cold blood, with half an eye toward her life insurance policy. He systematically cut the brake pads. The whole incident would have thrown his moral perspective askew, and the stress from that would have been enormous. And then there were his sexual relations with his mother…"

The Doctor trailed off at this point, searching for a new, slightly more comfortable, tangent. "Also, Shell's mother was, in her own right, no stranger to the law. We ran a search on the old records at the DA's office and discovered that she'd been arrested for insurance fraud, and not just once either. Furthermore, her husband was dead, and she was even suspected of murdering him in order to get her hands on *his* insurance, although nothing was ever proven. There's every chance that Shell knew all about this and decided to do the same thing for himself. The mother had assaulted him, effectively, and what better way for Shell to repay *his* misadventure of birth than with *her* death by misadventure?"

The Doctor laughed in a somewhat forced manner at his own somewhat forced joke. Balot didn't respond.

"You might want to work on that one, Doc," said Oeufcoque, speaking for Balot as well.

The Doctor shrugged. "I'm just trying to get in the mood. Shell's past may be somewhat useful as concrete evidence in the courtroom, but more importantly, it's going to pique the curiosity of the jury. The more detailed and salacious the better, even if it does come in the form of a bad pun, as you so helpfully pointed out, thank you, Oeufcoque. The DA is certainly delighted with this new turn of events, anyway. He's now confident that we'll nail the case."

The Doctor's voice was steeped in cynicism, just as the whole situation was steeped in irony—indeed, there was no greater irony for Balot. At the previous trial, she'd found herself on the receiving end of the most thorough and gut-wrenching attack imaginable, all on account of her own history. As a result, she was forced to repudiate her past, cut it off and cast it away, or else her heart would have died from the pain.

And now Shell would find himself in exactly the same position. The difference was that Shell had *already* repudiated his past and cast it away. All he had left was lingering trauma.

"This is not about revenge, Doctor. Tell the DA to make sure he sticks to the relevant facts and doesn't waste any time on unnecessary distractions," Oeufcoque said, again seemingly speaking for Balot by proxy. "We've already filed papers for the next case, the one that this all leads to. Let's make sure we don't lose sight of the biggest fish of all."

"Sure, sure. I know full well that it's not our job to fan the flames of curiosity for the jurors and the media—they're perfectly capable of doing that for themselves."

–Thank you.

"Having said that, there are no guarantees, I'm afraid," the Doctor continued, somewhat apologetically now. "The counsel for the defense is quite a lawyer. I wouldn't put it past Shell to stir up the hornets' nest either. If that happens, it'll be hard for me to hold the DA back from laying it on thick…"

Then the Doctor's tone changed abruptly, and he turned to look at Balot, his eyes sincere. "It's just—well, this is only a theory, but hear me out. You can shave away the memory, but the *shape* of the memory still remains. All you need to do is apply emphasis—*stress*—to the outlines of that memory, and everything in your mind is thrown up in the air. Your moral compass goes haywire. What better proof do we need than the living example of Shell to show firsthand the sort of damage to society that's being caused by OctoberCorp's irresponsible, gung-ho technology?"

–Do you think Shell would stop killing people if he had his memories returned to him?

Balot asked the question out of a simple desire to know the answer.

Oeufcoque fielded this one. "Well, there's absolutely no doubt that Shell's missing memories are exacerbating his urges. If all his memories were to be returned to him then his desire to rape and murder would certainly diminish, possibly even fade away completely. But Shell wouldn't want this for himself."

–Well, I wouldn't want his past either.

After she spoke, Balot hung her head in contemplation. The Doctor and Oeufcoque left her in peace for a moment. After a suitable pause Oeufcoque continued gently, "The past is nothing more than a fossil. To think that the past always *has* to determine the future is to doom yourself into becoming no more than a fossil yourself. Shell made the *wrong choice*, that's all."

–Wrong choice?

“At the very least, we can say that he didn’t endure, didn’t resist, unlike you. He just thought to console himself with the sacrifices of others.

Balot thought about this for a while, then touched Oeufcoque.

–It was you two who saved me. Thank you.

The Doctor threw his arms up in the air and grinned, a twinkle in his eye. “I hope you got that on tape, Oeufcoque! There’s the proof of our *usefulness* for the Broilerhouse! What better words of validation could there be for *Mardock Scramble 09?*”

“Doc, you know as well as I do that there’s no way I’d do such a thing without Balot’s permission.”

“Hmmph. Shame…”

Balot laughed in spite of herself.

The atmosphere in the room—so heavily laden with the pressure of having all their lives so inextricably linked—lifted, just a little.

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The trial began half an hour later.

As ever, the proceedings moved along at a sluggish pace, but at least Shell’s lawyer could see which way the wind was blowing, and he put up no more than token, ineffectual resistance. Rather than fighting the case, the defense attorney seemed almost to withdraw from the scene, looking for an escape route that would—as much as possible—allow him to keep both his dignity and career intact. As a result, Shell’s memories were shielded from the worst excesses of scurrilous gossip that usually came with the public dissection of juicy secrets—though Shell didn’t seem the least bit grateful that, in this respect at least, he had escaped the worst.

The trial was over by 16:45, four hours after it had begun.

Shell was taken to prison.

02

There was a sudden *ping*—a message had arrived.

The Doctor looked suspiciously at his PDA after fishing it out of his jacket pocket.

They were in the middle of an early dinner at one of the fancy restaurants in the neighborhood of the Broilerhouse.

It was the sort of place lawyers went to celebrate a victory or victims went to celebrate after being awarded a windfall compensation. Balot, the Doctor, and Oeufcoque were celebrating there too, although it wasn't so much in order to enjoy a gourmet meal as to take a much-needed pause before the case was finally wrapped up. A pause to mark the end of one chapter in Balot's life, to celebrate all she had achieved and to prepare her to embark upon a new chapter. Oeufcoque and the Doctor felt she needed a little treat.

"It's from the DA. Apparently the other side wants to talk, and they're putting in their offer to us immediately." The Doctor looked away from his PDA and toward Oeufcoque, who was still in the form of a choker. "The person offering the settlement isn't even directly related to this case—he's stepped in to try and broker a settlement."

"Who is it?"

"The director of OctoberCorp. Shell's boss—and putative father-in-law."

–What's going on? I don't understand.

Sensing that Balot was concerned, the Doctor smiled in order to try and calm her down. Behind his spectacles though, his eyes weren't smiling. Rather they were set in steely resolution.

"You remember the man standing beside Shell at the Casino. Cleanwill John October. Well, he's proposing a negotiation."

–To negotiate what?

"The second case, as it were. The one that will implicate all OctoberCorp officials for more or less ordering Shell to commit his crime spree. You see, we intend to use your case as a vein and continue digging till we find the mother lode—it's not just Shell that we're after. That's what they're afraid of, so they're asking for certain facts to be made public…"

–Use my case?

Balot frowned a little.

The Doctor hastily covered his tracks. "Not in a bad way. I just mean that the chips you won give us a lot of power and leverage."

–So, to put it in blackjack terms, what we're doing is instead of staying, we're hitting in order to try and draw out some more criminals?

"Well, in the end, Shell's just as much a victim of OctoberCorp as anyone else is. You've seen his memories firsthand, so I'm sure you understand that."

Balot nodded. Oeufcoque remained silent.

The Doctor continued. "The brain surgery Shell received as a child, the *A10* operation, that was OctoberCorp's handiwork. It's entirely possible to believe that this is what made him slavishly follow OctoberCorp's orders."

–You mean they messed around with his head and made him their slave?

"Not in the sense of controlling his thought processes directly, but I'd say there was a good

chance they were artificially stimulating his pleasure centers, making it far more likely for him to follow orders with blind devotion."

–How?

"Well, for example, they could make it so that every time he hears the OctoberCorp name or sees its symbol, a dopamine shot is released inside his brain, and he feels just that little bit better. Reinforced tens, hundreds of times, it becomes an unbreakable habit, absolute."

–I think that all Shell really wanted to do was escape. From his own life.

Oeufcoque interjected for the first time in the conversation. "And what OctoberCorp did was provide him with an escape route. The ultimate inducement into temptation."

Balot nodded. She started to remember what it felt like when she was watching Shell's memories.

–Shell seemed to think that working for OctoberCorp was just like a fish returning upstream to spawn. He considered himself as no more than a little fish, placed deliberately in the river.

Then Balot turned straight to the Doctor to look at him and ask him a question.

–The case that they want to try and settle—is it my case too?

The Doctor was about to nod, but Oeufcoque interrupted him. "You've already solved your own case. There's no need for you to put yourself in danger's way anymore."

"Hey, wait a minute, Oeufcoque. Her case leads to the mother lode. All that's happened so far is that Shell has temporarily lost his liberty. As yet, OctoberCorp is still untouched and untroubled. In any case, she's already been officially recognized as a co-opted civilian aide to this case. As your user, we do really need her."

Oeufcoque was unconvinced—and not only that, he was now uncharacteristically raising his voice. "Are you saying that we are the ones who get to choose whether Balot gets burnt out in the process?"

The Doctor appeared to falter, but he had a rejoinder. "I don't know if you noticed, but at the trial just now, Balot's Life Preservation Program was extended indefinitely. You know *why*, don't you? Because the Broilerhouse recognizes that she's *still in danger*. We don't know what Boiled's got up his sleeve, and depending on how these negotiations go, we may find that both Shell *and* Balot end up targets of OctoberCorp…"

–Half-baked little Oeufcoque…

Balot spoke quietly. The Doctor swallowed his words. Oeufcoque also was silent.

–Thank you so much for trying to protect me from ending up even more burnt out.

Just as Oeufcoque could now sniff out Balot's innermost feelings, Balot was attuned to Oeufcoque's emotional state. She knew full well that he blamed himself for not being able to protect her from the worst excesses of Shell's corrupted memories while she was in her dream state.

–This is what I've chosen, though. I* want *to use you constructively. If you want to protect me, the best way to do that is to* guide *me.

"Even if, as a result, you end up facing something deeply unpleasant?"

–Bell Wing called you my guardian angel. Guardian angels are strict but kind. If I run away from everything that's unpleasant, I'll end up just like Shell messing with his own mind in order to try and find peace.

Why me? She still wanted more answers to this question. She was the Concerned Party in this case, and she wanted to find out what that really meant…

She wanted to determine with her own eyes what exactly it was that lay beyond the depths that she and Shell had fallen into.

She wanted to be able to feel with conviction that her own life was somehow *meaningful*.

She touched the choker on her neck, gently transmitting these feelings to Oeufcoque, like a prayer.

–This is our case. Yours and mine. All three of us. Won't you please show me your way of resolving it?

Oeufcoque stayed silent for a while. Then, wordlessly, he agreed to bring Balot out. To take her away from her safe place and into the maelstrom.

"We need to solve the second case, and as such I'd like Balot to use me," Oeufcoque said eventually.

The Doctor breathed a sigh of relief. "I have absolutely no aptitude for this sort of thing myself, you see. Gunfights aren't my scene. Preparation and maintenance—now, you can rely on me for those—but if things start getting violent it's Balot who will to need to protect *me*."

Balot nodded. As long as she had Oeufcoque by her side she was confident she could do anything.

"Looks like we're on the road to victory, then. Come on, let's go. Time for us to solve *our* case."

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Balot went to sort out her outfit in the bathroom while the Doctor settled the bill.

She rolled up the long skirt that she had worn for the trial and took her underwear off and placed it on top of the toilet.

She took off her shoes and socks, placing her socks next to her underwear. Then she reached around and unzipped her dress, unhooked her bra, and loosened the belts that ran up and down her body.

She focused her mind on the precise image of the new outfit—*a new shell*—that she wanted.

–I'm ready.

She touched her choker to transmit the image to Oeufcoque.

Oeufcoque's *turn* was quick and thorough. A skintight bodysuit spread out from underneath the choker, sliding neatly between Balot's body and the clothes she still had on. It enveloped Balot swiftly from tip to toe. Power flowed through her.

Balot adjusted her clothes, put her shoes and socks back on, and left the bathroom. She glanced at herself in the mirror on the way out and subtly altered the design and color of the bodysuit so that it matched the rest of her clothes.

She returned to the restaurant and joined the Doctor to head out to the parking lot.

The red convertible was as good as new, brought back up to scratch in a week.

The car was officially registered as being made by an obscure custom car company, one that existed more or less in name only. There was only one garage that did repairs, and they had to

special-order the parts on contract.

The parts in question were, of course, *Made by Oeufcoque*. Oeufcoque's existence as a sentient being may not have been officially acknowledged, but the parts that he made certainly were.

They climbed into the car and the Doctor inserted the key and set the controls to AutoDrive. The steering wheel sank into the dashboard and found itself fixed in position.

"I'd be drunk driving otherwise. It'll take us a little longer, but let's go on auto."

Balot fastened her seat belt, and the car moved off.

Their destination was a high-class bar on the North Side, and they had plenty of time to get there.

"Excuse me a minute," the Doctor said as he leaned over toward the passenger seat and pressed his fingers against the electronic fingerprint scanner. A compartment in the dashboard opened out, revealing maps, a wallet, a small handgun, and a bottle of pills.

The Doctor placed the handgun in his jacket pocket and took the bottle in his hand.

The pills contained a potent double dose: a mixture of caffeine and enzymes that accelerated the breakdown of alcohol. The Doctor threw a fistful of them into his mouth as if they were so much candy, then popped the bottle back in the compartment, which he pushed back into the dashboard.

"Now, let's see how they're going to play this one…"

"They're doing everything by the book so far," Oeufcoque said, his voice emerging from the vicinity of Balot's left hand. The Doctor nodded as if the short conversation had settled everything.

Balot looked straight ahead at the road. She thought how there was still so much she needed to learn.

"This is not a good smell. They're waiting for us, ready for something. We're not talking just one or two people there, either—there are at least five of them," Oeufcoque said when they parked the car two blocks away from the bar.

The Doctor checked something out quickly on his PDA, then shrugged. "I get it. The bar's part of a chain, and guess which corporation owns the chain? Not that I imagine many of their directors visit on a regular basis, of course."

"How convenient for them. I guess the idea is that the whole bar could disappear off the face of the earth if need be," said Oeufcoque.

"Uh-huh. It's the underbelly of their empire—a place they use to conduct the shadier end of their business transactions. Rather than bothering to go in, why don't we just launch a rocket or two at them? The joint's a front, anyway—it's not as if there'd be any innocent bystanders caught up in it."

Balot braced herself, imagining for a moment that the Doctor was indeed about to do as he suggested.

"So we're terrorists on top of everything else now, are we, Doc?" Oeufcoque's sarcastic reply made Balot realize that of course they were going to do no such thing. "They're going through the official channels, and as long as they stick to this, we do the same."

"Sure, sure. Can't say I'm wildly enthusiastic about the prospect, though. I suppose we can expect them to suggest some sort of trade or information exchange, although I'm not quite sure what they imagine is going to be in it for us. They must know by now that we're not the sort to be

bought off."

"So we go in fully expecting that they'll have other means of *persuasion* at their disposal," said Oeufcoque.

–Are we going to be using guns?

"Hmm… If it comes to it, I'll leave that side of things to you and Oeufcoque, if that's okay. My speciality is really the negotiating part. If the going gets tough, I hope you won't mind if I'm first out the door?"

The Doctor looked so serious that Balot nodded without even thinking.

"Right, then, let's go!" With these words the Doctor hopped out of the car and walked toward the quiet bar on the quiet street. Balot followed, and soon they had reached the main entrance of the pub.

There were two sets of doors, and Balot realized that something was up the moment they passed through the first set.

Someone was watching them. The Doctor had noticed it too.

They opened the second set of doors and went in. The clientele seemed at first glance to be a surprisingly refined lot—some were smoking cigars or drinking brandy from large goblets, others were reading newspapers or discussing the latest stock market fluctuations.

It was a veritable pocket of resistance against the recent all-pervasive trend of smoking bans.

Balot and the Doctor went up to the center of the bar and took a seat. Had they not been in the clothes they wore for court, they would have felt terribly out of place. No one else sat at the bar; patrons lounged on plush leather sofas or in boxes lined with red velvet curtains.

The Doctor pointed to a bottle on the counter, then went into a detailed spiel as to how exactly the bartender was to prepare it.

The bartender—middle-aged, receding hairline—took his order with a nod, and then looked at Balot. Balot didn't really need anything, but she thought back to a Western she had seen in her childhood and recalled what the hero ordered when he was in a bar.

–A glass of milk, please.

She spoke through the crystal on her choker. A funny look flickered across the bartender's face.

Balot didn't know whether it was her order that was at fault or whether he was just surprised by her voice. Or it could have been that he was surprised by the very fact that someone like Balot was in this place.

If he felt something was odd, the bartender certainly hid it well. "Would you like ice with that, miss?" he asked.

This part wasn't in the Western.

Balot thought for a moment, then nodded meekly.

The bartender prepared the two drinks with a precision that could only come from years of practice. He put the bottle the Doctor pointed to on the bar so that the Doctor could check the label. Balot thought for a moment that the bartender might do the same for her with the carton of milk, but it wasn't to be—it went straight back in the refrigerator.

The bartender placed the glasses on the bar, then retreated to one side.

"Hmm, maybe I should have ordered the same as you," said the Doctor, who could barely keep the laughter out of his voice. Balot looked at him.

"This is just some token hospitality before negotiations begin in earnest, by the way. They could well be here already, of course, just making us wait…" The Doctor took his glass in his

hand.

Suddenly, Balot's left hand jumped up to rest on the Doctor's shoulder—without Balot controlling it. "There's a fast-working sleeping draught in yours, Doc. Balot's is clear," whispered Oeufcoque.

The Doctor seemed more nonplussed than surprised. "So it's Balot they're after, is it? They're still hoping for the Trustees to *slip up*, I guess. They sure don't give up easily."

"All seven people in the room, including the bartender, are armed with handguns of one sort or another," continued Oeufcoque, before his hand moved off the Doctor's shoulder.

The Doctor shrugged. "Not much I can do to help, then. Looks like you two are on your own, sorry about that!" He clinked his glass with Balot's and downed his drink. "Urgh…and I'd only taken an antidote just before I came in too. I think I'm going to be sick…" The Doctor pulled a sour face, and Balot looked on at him with wide eyes.

The very next moment the pub entrance opened wide, and in came a well-built man, smiling broadly. "Dr. Easter? I'm Skyscraper. I trust you received my messages?"

"You're OctoberCorp's legal representative?" The Doctor's eyes were already starting to sag. Balot couldn't tell whether it was an act or not.

Skyscraper smiled again. "I'm one of the legal team, yes. I mainly handle criminal cases and compensation claims. I do apologize for having kept you so long. Please, do come and take a seat over here where it's more comfortable."

"Thank you," said the Doctor, walking over to the chairs as if he were floating on clouds. Balot followed him.

The man who called himself Skyscraper sat down last, squeezing his generous frame into the chair.

"I'll have the same as she's having," Skyscraper said to the bartender when he came to bring over Balot's glass on a tray. "What about you, sir, are you not drinking?"

"No, I'm fine, thankshh…" The Doctor's speech was growing suspiciously slurred.

It was pretty clear by now that the Doctor really *was* getting tired. Balot nudged his shoulder gently. She was trying to tell him that he could fall asleep safely and that she had everything under control, but Skyscraper evidently interpreted this move as concern on Balot's part.

"You do seem to be tired, sir. We'd better get this over with as quickly as possible, then. Not to worry about your return—we have a chauffeured car on hand to take you both back to wherever you need to go."

"You put in your request for a pretrial settlement just this afternoon?" The Doctor yawned.

"Yes, although we've had all the relevant paperwork prepared for some time."

"That's very considerate of you."

"Ah, yes, well, we may be on different sides, but we do have certain issues in common. Our jobs are to safeguard the long-term interests of our respective businesses by ensuring that our people are protected and that our businesses are allowed to develop progressively."

"Is that right? Well, uh, I suppose that's so, isn't it?" said the Doctor.

"Yes, and we at OctoberCorp are most concerned about the man you brought to trial, Shell-Septinos. We feel that his future prospects are most lamentable," said Skyscraper.

"Well, you would, wouldn't you, given that he seems to know everything about everything. And?"

Skyscraper's beaming face was unflinching in the face of the Doctor's flippant riposte. Then he

shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Balot with a concerned expression.

Balot knew all too well how quickly the smiles of these sorts of men changed.

"The crimes that the man committed are terrible, of course. There's no denying that. But to refuse him any possibility of rehabilitation is to refute the significance of the law. OctoberCorp's position is that we would like to give him the opportunity to reflect on his crimes and thereby gradually redeem himself. We will of course, Ms. Rune-Balot, foot the bill for any portion of the compensation that you are awarded and that he is unable to pay you out of his own assets."

Skyscraper smiled at Balot in anticipation of her answer. *This is how much I'll pay, now will you give me what I want?* Balot had seen that inane grin too many times.

It was the Doctor who spoke next, though. "And so it came to pass that Shell lived out his days peacefully under the thumb of his corporate masters… That's how the story goes, is it? Presumably we get our brown envelope under the table if—and *only* if—we don't touch on any, uh, *inconvenient* truths during the next trial?"

"Dear, dear, Dr. Easter! I do hope you don't speak quite so bluntly when you're in court!"

"Maybe not out loud, but I certainly think it. As for your answer, well, I'll make sure that a reply is sent to you by email through the official Broilerhouse channels. It'll be a short reply, though. Shorter than the password you'll need to get into it."

"And what sort of reply might that be?"

"'Dear Balloon-face. Eat shit.'"

Skyscraper's smile seemed to stretch even farther.

His face turned crimson, his eyes bloodshot. Yet he was still smiling. A grotesque sight.

"You see, we're PIs, and our job is to solve this case," said the Doctor, smiling back, a very different sort of smile. "The courtroom antics are only a small part of that. The best thing you can do now is run along and try and deceive the judge into believing that there are any number of holes in our case, maybe appeal for a retrial. Won't do you any good in the long run, though."

With that, the Doctor toppled face-first onto the table in front of him.

Balot was visibly concerned. She was worried that the Doctor might have hurt himself.

Skyscraper thought she was worried about her own safety. "Poor little princess. Aren't you enjoying your milk anymore?" he said, his voice now steeped with sarcasm. "Don't blame me, blame this idiot here who you trusted to keep you safe."

His dark red cheeks puffed out as he rose out of his seat toward her. He wore a whole new expression now, one in which rage and joy intermingled in equal measure. He was practically drooling as his thick arms reached out toward Balot to grab her, but Balot slipped to one side.

"We know you're unarmed, we scanned you on the X-ray as you came in," Skyscraper smirked. "The man has a handgun in his pocket, but that's all you have, right?"

So that explained the uneasy sensation Balot had experienced when she entered the bar.

Balot realized that the people at the other tables were now drawing in.

–Oeufcoque, these people are enemies, right?

Balot wanted to make sure she was doing the right thing before she did anything she couldn't take back.

"That's right. They're planning on holding you for ransom, and in exchange for your release they'll try and force us to relinquish the chips as evidence," Oeufcoque said out loud, unconcerned as to who could hear him.

A puzzled expression crossed Skyscraper's face. "Who's that speaking—"

–Am I allowed to shoot them?

"Sure, but no more than absolutely necessary. No need to stoop to their level."

Balot's left arm was under the table, and she felt it grow heavy with the weight of cold steel.

There was an explosion, and Skyscraper screamed and staggered backward. He'd had a lucky escape—Balot had actually aimed for his crotch, but Oeufcoque had stayed her hand and made the bullet fly through the top of his foot instead.

Balot lifted the table up quickly with Oeufcoque's help—the bodysuit that was him melded with her body, allowing her to lift the table up as if it were made of cardboard.

She threw the Doctor's sleeping body onto the sofa to keep him out of harm's way, scattering their glasses across the floor as she turned the table on its side. Fragments of glass and ice shattered and flew every which way. Balot wondered where she had seen such a scene before, and then she remembered. *The Western, of course.*

"We keep the death toll to a minimum. Got it?"

–Fine.

Balot emerged from behind the plush red curtains and fired at three men in order as they attempted to fire bullets or electronic charges at her. She hit their shoulders with pinpoint accuracy, and they fell to the floor and rolled around in agony.

The other men were flustered now, and they fired a storm of bullets at her. The upturned table shook from the impact. Balot stuck her arm out from behind it and fired swiftly. Not a single bullet of hers was wasted. The first two men found their fingers blown off; Balot had targeted their guns, piercing the cartridges and causing them to explode. The men never knew what hit them. Balot then fired a couple more shots for good measure. The bullets thudded into their thighs, bringing them down.

Balot jumped out of the booth, table leg under her arm.

The men looked on in disbelief as Balot advanced with the table—a lump of wood that weighed at least as much as she did—as a shield. They gave her everything they had, firing blindly. In return Balot fired a salvo of bullets straight into their collarbones. Not a single one of her shots missed.

Just then the bartender emerged from behind the counter with a shotgun in his hands.

Balot didn't even need to look at him to thrust an arm out sideways and put bullets straight through both his shoulders. *Unbelievable*, his face seemed to say, as he turned a backflip into the array of bottles that lined the bar.

The last man standing in the bar had his gun held out with a stupefied expression. Balot stuck her head out from behind the table, and the man hastily fired off a series of shots. He was at point-blank range and still failed to hit her, and indeed one of the flying bullets grazed his own arm as it ricocheted back, making him yelp. The bullet smashed into a large mirror at the end of the counter, and Balot expected it to shatter, but other than the new hole adorning it, the mirror seemed fine—as it turned out, it was a fairly sturdy specimen.

Balot brandished the table over her head and threw it at the man.

The man screamed, loud and shrill, and was thrown back into the booth along with the table.

The bar was evidently fitted with quality air conditioning, as the white smoke in the air was already being sucked away. No one was dead, but all Balot's assailants were thoroughly incapacitated. Balot ejected her cartridge, reloaded it with a new one generated from within the gun, and went to sit back down in the same booth she had been sitting at.

There, the Doctor was snuggled up against Skyscraper, the former happily snoring away while the latter whimpered in pain and fear. Balot tapped Skyscraper on his shoulder, causing him to scream and push his chunky frame back against the wall. He squirmed so hard, it appeared as if he hoped he might be able to melt into the wall.

"I…I'm just a hired hand! Please…" For someone who had succeeded so far in one of the most sought-after professions in Mardock City, the lawyer cut a pretty pathetic figure.

–What do we do now? Just go home?

"Let's establish just who this 'hired hand' was hired *by*." With that, Oeufcoque *turned* with a squelch, and Balot's glove became a cell phone.

Balot tossed the cell at Skyscraper's knees.

"Call your employer. We want to speak to him directly." Oeufcoque's voice emerged from the cell phone. Skyscraper, a quivering wreck, needed no additional encouragement.

He had to try the number a few times before he eventually got through. "Hello…this is Sky… Skyscraper here. The other party in the negotiations…um…that is…they'd like to speak to you directly. Er…yes, surely…"

He passed the phone back to Balot with a trembling hand. Balot didn't even bother putting the earpiece to her ear. All she needed to do was *connect* to the part of Oeufcoque that was inside her suit.

"Mr. Cleanwill John October? Director at OctoberCorp? This is Oeufcoque-Penteano here, PI and Trustee for this case." Oeufcoque spoke out loud so that Skyscraper could hear too. Balot was starting to get fed up with Skyscraper's miserable face, so she got up and wandered over to the bar in search of the carton of milk.

Then they heard the sneering laughter of Cleanwill John October on the phone.

–That was quite a show you put on for us back at the casino. How did you use your last ten thousand dollars? A fancy meal at some restaurant you couldn't normally afford? A holiday to take your mind off your woes, perhaps?

"The game's up. We're arresting you for attempted kidnapping and blackmail."

–Where's your proof that I'm behind this? You have no witnesses. No one will arrest me.

Balot shrugged. Thinking how she was grateful that she didn't have to talk directly to such a person, she placed her gun on the counter, took a carton of milk from the refrigerator below the counter, picked up one of the few glasses that remained intact, and poured herself a glass. She was effectively committing robbery, she realized, but there wasn't any other way she was going to get her drink.

She added a couple of ice cubes to her drink and took a seat at the bar. She stared into the mirror at the end of the bar, repelled by the nearby phone conversation.

–More importantly, why don't you think about settling? The trial's going to be a washout.

"Washout? It's too late for you to try and bring our case down by establishing a counter-case, if that's what you mean."

–Not if we've already applied for our own case. Looks like we'll be taking the same defendant to court.

"The same defendant?"

–Shell-Septinos has brought about considerable damage to OctoberCorp. The man has tarnished our good name and standing, took on fraudulent loans for his own personal advantage, and even had the audacity to demand a share of our assets.

"How convenient for you. By assets I assume you're referring to the dowry he would presumably have received as a matter of course in marrying your daughter?"

–Marrying her? Ah, yes, there was such talk at one stage, wasn't there?

John paused to laugh, a most peculiar sound.

–Ours is a family business—family is our rock and the foundation of our success. I was actually pleased to think that I had managed to find someone suitable to take that woman off my hands.

Balot squeezed her glass tightly. Suddenly she had a feeling that she was *missing* something. Something to do with the building they were in…

–Shell—I didn't actually dislike him, truth be told. He had a good head on his shoulders and a certain tenacity of spirit. I admire that in a man. It's no lie to say that he had excellent prospects, and we're telling the truth when we say his current prospects are most lamentable.

Balot's feeling of unease started to solidify inside her. John's words were triggering alarm bells somewhere deep inside her unconscious. Balot tried to put her finger on the reason.

–But our company—we're just as much victims of Shell as you are. We could just sit here and squabble amongst ourselves, of course, but wouldn't it be better if we collaborated in prosecuting Shell together? There's plenty of scope for negotiation here, don't you think?

"What exactly are you planning to do? Have him imprisoned and transported to a state where they have capital punishment, so that you can have the law do away with him for good?"

John laughed. Balot heard the laugh as if it were echoing in the room right beside her. *His future prospects are most lamentable.* Someone had said something like this before. Skyscraper.

–We need not trouble ourselves right now about what may or may not happen after Shell goes to prison. The important thing is that there is a certain someone *who has been hurt deeply by Shell's actions—a certain someone who was hoping to marry him and has been damaged as a result of what Shell has done. She'll be inheriting the mantle of this case—or rather, OctoberCorp will on her behalf.*

"Inheriting it…"

–Shell's case will be closed shortly, and with it he'll lose the right to have a PI investigate on his behalf. We'll simply rehire the excellent PI that he currently has in his employ and have him work for us. The contractual negotiations are already in place.

"You're going to have Boiled kill Shell, is that the idea? You…"

–Well, it looks like the children of Scramble 09 *are going to have the opportunity to fight this one out amongst themselves. In the meanwhile, it'll be our own OctoberCorp that's wholeheartedly received by the people of Mardock City, just as the Three Magi wanted.*

"You dare to invoke the Three Magi? Can you put your founding director on the line to support your cock-and-bull story?"

–She's a sleeping beauty who won't be waking up anytime soon. You know as well as I do that she's brain-dead.

"What I *do* know is that OctoberCorp is taking advantage of her comatose state to abuse the technology she gave you and make dirty money, under the pretext of 'what the Three Magi would have wanted.' You know full well that none of the Three Magi really want such a thing."

–Is that so? I can tell you that plenty of people in this city would disagree with you—they like *being "abused" by our technology, as you put it. We're just doing our duty as a clan to develop our inheritance—our duty to ensure the progress of OctoberCorp.*

"That's a foul deceit—trying to justify the suffering of innocent victims, hiding behind weasel words."

–Do you know the origin of what we call the Stairway to Heaven, Mardock*?*

"What—"

–Mardock was the name of the son of the goddess. He killed his own mother and usurped her role as creator, ruling in her place far more effectively than she ever did. In much the same way, we at OctoberCorp are here to use *the technology brought into the world by the Three Magi. The old moral values are obsolete in the face of social progress.*

"That's just a fantasy that you guys conjured up to suit your own ends. There's no such thing as *old* or *new* morals, just morality."

–I wouldn't expect you to think anything else—a creature who narrowly escaped destruction only by hiding behind the shield of Mardock Scramble. *Your so-called* Scramble 09 *is nothing more than a smokescreen whipped up by freaks such as you so that you can desperately try to justify your existence to a society who never asked for you in the first place and doesn't want you now. But has society ever felt that way about OctoberCorp, the OctoberCorp that fulfills so many of its needs? I don't think so, somehow…*

John's voice was more sonorous than ever, and Balot honed in on the direction from which it came.

"No one who refuses to acknowledge that they themselves are potentially dangerous has any right to lecture others about morality," Oeufcoque stated boldly. As he did so, Balot jumped into action.

With all her might she threw the glass in her hand toward the mirror at the end of the bar.

The mirror that one of the men's stray bullets had cracked but not destroyed only a minute ago.

The glass smashed against the mirror, splashing the milk across the surface.

There was an audible gasp on the cell phone. This confirmed Balot's suspicions, and she moved quickly. She picked up her gun from the counter and unloaded it into the mirror in one swift movement.

It really was a sturdy mirror. It took over ten shots before it gave up the ghost and started to collapse. Finally, though, it started peeling from the wall.

It was a one-way mirror. And the scene behind it was now revealed to all in the bar.

Balot threw her gun down and *snarced* the left hand of her bodysuit so that she held a brand-new one in her grip.

Gun outthrust, she stood in front of the warped mirror.

A wave of disgust ran over her, one that made every hair on her body stand on end. Before she even had the chance to think about what she was doing, she pulled the trigger, hard. Oeufcoque was there for her, suppressing the bullet, stopping the action inside himself.

"Ah…you seem to have us at a disadvantage, sir. I never imagined for a moment that you would be in such a place. Although I daresay the disadvantage is now all yours…" Unusually for Oeufcoque, his voice dripped with sarcasm. But Oeufcoque was Oeufcoque, after all, and he could only take so much—the whole scene was evidently getting to him. "I can't say I think much of your *hobbies*, sir. By the look of it, I can see all sorts of laws being broken…"

Beyond the mirror were five or six boys and girls in varying degrees of undress, all young. Preteen young. In the midst of them was a giant lump of flesh—far bigger than Skyscraper—sprawled on a sofa in a nightgown, holding a phone in his hand and looking at Balot in mute terror.

“This is private property…” the corpulent figure finally managed to spit out. It was the same man they had seen back at the casino—none other than Cleanwill John October.

“Indeed, so we’ll refrain from actually entering unless we’re forced to. We’ll just wait here, keeping you under guard until the police arrive. Cleanwill John October, as a PI and Trustee for this case, I invoke my jurisdiction to arrest you on charges of attempted kidnapping, extortion, and —well, lots of other things.”

Oeufcoque managed to stay levelheaded. The proof of this was that he kept the safety catch on the gun firmly engaged. “Balot, call for police backup.”

Balot shook her head. She wanted to kill them—kill them all, even the young boys and girls with John. She remembered the lecherous smirk on Skyscraper’s face, thought again about what it meant he wanted to do to her, and felt her blood rushing around her body so quickly she thought it might start flowing backward.

“*Balot*.” Oeufcoque spoke even more deliberately.

“Yaaargh!” A scream came at them from behind, though not before Balot and Oeufcoque both realized it was coming.

Skyscraper had emerged from the booth and was charging toward them, gun in hand.

Balot didn’t even turn around; she merely fired off a number of shots over her own shoulder.

Both of Skyscraper’s shoulders and both his knees were pulverized in an instant. His scream rose in pitch a few notches, and he writhed helplessly on the floor.

Balot’s eyes remained fixed on the giant figure on the other side of the mirror. After the gunshots, all thought of resistance had been wiped from Cleanwill John October’s mind, and he blubbered, “Peace! Let’s do this in peace!” Both his arms were raised in a wobbly surrender.

Balot would have rather seen him *in pieces* than *in peace*, but she managed to overcome this feeling to take a step back from the broken mirror and *snarc* her cell phone to call the police.

She left the rest to Oeufcoque. It was the only way she could get through this.

She was exhausted. There was much she still had to learn. It made her head spin.

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Police sirens converged on the bar. Balot was in the passenger seat of the red convertible, watching the young children as they were wrapped in blankets and escorted to safety.

John October had already been taken away in custody along with the other men in the bar.

“To think that we’d be able to catch one of OctoberCorp’s directors so easily,” said the Doctor. He was relaxed, still a little sleepy, but was focused on the task at hand. The second case could now progress.

Oeufcoque told him the details of his conversation with John, and the Doctor frowned. “Doesn’t that make Boiled more or less a fully paid employee of OctoberCorp?” the Doctor asked.

“It could be that Boiled is now planning on taking Shell prisoner. I suggest we play along with OctoberCorp for a little longer and make out that we’re interested in continuing discussions with them. That will buy us some time.”

“OctoberCorp is more ruthless than you give them credit for, Oeufcoque. At this stage it’s do

or die. The only thing that'll make the difference between victory and defeat is Shell and his memories. That Shell—" At this point the Doctor and Oeufcoque fell silent.

"Where's Shell right now?" asked Oeufcoque sharply.

The Doctor fumbled with his PDA. "He's been released on bail pending his final trial, and he's permitted to travel within a two-kilometer radius of the hotel he's staying at. There should be specialists from the DA's office tailing him, of course, but…"

"How long before Boiled hears about what's gone down here?"

"He's probably already heard," said the Doctor.

"We need to hurry, then."

Without another moment's notice, the Doctor revved up the car, and it sped off from a standing start. Balot, who had zoned out, was jolted back into consciousness and rushed to secure her seat belt.

–What's the matter?

Balot spoke by *snarcing* the car stereo.

The Doctor shook his head. "It's Boiled. Unless he gets an order from OctoberCorp to stop him, he might end up killing Shell. It'd be such a shame to lose our main piece of leverage now that we have one of OctoberCorp's directors in the bag."

–What are we going to do?

It was Oeufcoque who answered this. "The Doctor will head to the Broilerhouse. We'll go to the hotel Shell is staying at and ensure his safety."

–I'm going to go and save Shell's life?

This time she didn't use the car stereo, but rather *snarced* Oeufcoque directly.

"That's right."

–How strange…

Balot was silent, thoughtful.

They arrived at the Broilerhouse, and the Doctor jumped out and rushed in without even looking back. Balot programmed the name of Shell's hotel into the display, and the car set off.

The car pulled into the hotel's underground parking lot, and Oeufcoque gave Balot the latest news. "Just in from the Doctor. Shell's in room 663."

Balot took the key from the ignition and hurried toward the hotel lobby. She headed into an elevator, then suddenly realized that the buttons stopped at the fortieth floor.

"This is an emergency. Protecting Shell takes priority over any legal niceties," Oeufcoque said, before Balot even had the opportunity to ask. She *snarced* the elevator, sending it up to the sixty-sixth floor. There was no one else in the elevator and no sign of anyone in the corridor when Balot stepped out.

Suddenly—without Balot having to *snarc* anything—she felt a squish about her left hand and realized that she was holding a gun. "Be careful."

Balot progressed with the utmost care. She walked down the corridor with silent footfalls and stopped right in front of the target door. She sensed what was on the other side of the door—no sign of movement.

Balot *snarced* the electronic door lock open, calling on help from Oeufcoque to decode it.

No sooner had she opened the door than Balot was assaulted by a lukewarm blast of air.

The air conditioner wasn't working. Next to the door was a large dresser coated with a layer of condensed water vapor.

There was the sound of running water; Balot headed slowly for the bathroom. An orange light was on, and steam billowed out, filling the room.

Balot steadied her gun and entered the bathroom. She was filled with an uneasy premonition. She was sure that there was no sign of movement from inside, and her mind couldn't help but carry this observation through to its logical conclusion. She walked across the polished marble floor and past a large mirror toward the source of the steaming, bubbling water.

Balot's feet stepped in flowing water.

She put her hand on the shower curtain and, taking a deep breath, yanked it back.

The sight that assailed her made her heart miss a beat.

A woman swayed in the water, her mouth O-shaped, as if she were screaming silently. Her head floated but her mouth was full of splashing water, and her eyes had started to go muddy, cooked by the near-boiling hot water.

The woman was naked, and her long blonde hair covered her body as the hot water continued to flow.

Her body was covered with black and blue bruises. Bruises that were no doubt inflicted on her when she resisted, or perhaps bruises she received because she *couldn't* resist.

Finally, Balot exhaled. A stream of cold vapor in the steamy room.

"Looks like this was Shell's fiancée…" Oeufcoque muttered.

Balot was suddenly overtaken by an urge. She left the bathroom and headed for the living room, positioning herself in front of the television. She *snarced* it to grasp its inner workings, then accessed the Internet.

"What's this about, Balot?" Oeufcoque seemed concerned, but Balot ignored him, turning the television on and bringing up a map of the city. Her eyes remained wide open as she logged into a number of servers, cracking the encrypted passwords with ease.

"Stop it, Balot! What are you trying to do—find Shell? You're hacking into public networks, you know! That's a crime! There are official channels we need to go through for this sort of thing. Don't you start running off the rails too!"

Balot stared at the television, tears suddenly filling her eyes. Her face crumpled and she sat down. She cried without making a sound, lifting her gun in her hand as she did so.

–Let me kill Shell.

Her face was painfully sad as she *snarced* Oeufcoque.

–Let me kill* that man *Cleanwill too.

"Balot, it's no good thinking like—"

–Please. Let me. I don't even care if I die afterward.

"Balot…are you angry? Or sad?"

Balot shook her head. *Neither. Both.* She felt her destiny swirling about her. Her terrible, terrible destiny. Why did Shell have to kill that woman in the bathroom? *I'm going to make you clean. I'm going to clean you up*. The words echoed around Balot's mind.

–I think that woman in there was the same as me.

Balot managed to *snarc* the words to Oeufcoque through the terrible memories that were resurfacing inside her.

"The same…? You mean, that is to say…" Oeufcoque started, but he didn't need to finish. He'd understood perfectly. The woman in the bathroom had *things* done to her by her father. Or

perhaps other men and women had done things to her.

–Please, let me kill them all. I don't care if I die myself. I don't care if I die.

"Calm down. This has nothing to do with you. Don't get sucked in. Take a deep breath and calm down."

Balot held on to her gun. Her whole body shook as she cried. Quietly, her breathing a mess.

Every possible horrible fate seemed to be in this room. For the first time ever, Balot experienced the feeling of seeing her sorrow transform not into anger but into sheer murderous intent. She wanted to kill Shell. She wanted to kill everyone who worked for OctoberCorp. She wanted to kill the others caught up in this case, Boiled and even the Doctor. Then, after she had done all that, she wanted to save the last bullet for herself.

–I can't bear it. Help me. Save me.

Balot felt a soft warmth in her left hand. She realized that Oeufcoque was trying to materialize.

Balot clasped her hands together in prayer, and Oeufcoque's upper body emerged. She almost smothered him completely, so desperate was her desire to have him comfort her.

Oeufcoque's piercing red eyes stared straight at her.

Tears dripped from Balot's face and splashed onto his little head, and he lifted his head toward the warm shower and said, "It's a good smell."

Balot's eyes narrowed as she looked at the mouse, the ultimate weapon and the last word in morality.

"Your soul—it smells good. Pure. It's telling me that if there's one thing I should believe in, it's you. I want to *make myself* believe in you. Shell and Boiled—they can't find it in themselves to believe in anything, so they're doomed to stay on the other side of the mirror forever. That place where Cleanwill was hiding. A place with no doubts or regrets to trouble you, but no hope either. I don't want to go to such a place."

Then Oeufcoque spread his arms out in a broad gesture, just like when the two of them had been introduced. "I entrust myself to you."

Droplets of tears welled up in Balot's eyes. She realized that he was indeed telling the truth.

He really was trusting everything to Balot. If Balot so wanted, she would have been able to *snarc* Oeufcoque away in an instant. Any abuse she wanted—she'd meet no further resistance. And yet it was this very lack of resistance that would prove to be the final restraint. It was the very fact that Oeufcoque was surrendering himself completely that would stop her.

Balot nodded. The sound of the water overflowing in the bathroom echoed all around.

Balot sniffed. She turned around where she sat so that she now faced in the direction of the bathroom.

As she did so, Oeufcoque *turned* back into a gun without saying anything.

She hadn't promised him anything. Even so, Oeufcoque had slipped back into her palm, ready.

Balot took a deep breath so that she could feel her entire bodysuit the better—the suit *Made by Oeufcoque*. Her chest swelled and she exhaled calmly. She stood up silently, went to the bathroom, and turned off the hot water.

She turned her back to the floating corpse of the woman and headed for the underground parking lot.

She climbed into the car, *snarced* the monitor next to the steering wheel, and the car took off.

Outside the sun had just gone down, and a cold night was closing in.

Balot wiped the last of her tears away and focused on the road ahead. There was still a lot she

had to learn. There really was.

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"Don't tell the police yet! Do you want OctoberCorp to get wind of what's happened?" Oeufcoque was speaking into the cell phone in Balot's grip. "That's right. Look up Shell's file. Right away."

There was a moment's silence, then the Doctor's voice, clearly surprised.

–Shell has a number of large outstanding debts that will be paid off by the woman's life insurance policy. As ever, he's made money out of the woman. Her death certificate reads two hours ago exactly. What sort of doctor would issue a certificate just like that?

The convertible was heading straight toward the Doctor at the Broilerhouse, but they were ready to change their course at a second's notice should new information arise. *New information* being Shell's whereabouts.

Balot stared ahead in a daze, thinking about the dead woman's face.

"Cleanwill must have been expecting Shell to kill that woman. That's what he meant by Shell losing his rights as a Concerned Party in the case. If the murder is made public, there's nothing to stop Boiled from officially being hired as Trustee for OctoberCorp and *apprehending* Shell."

–That's incredible… Whatever else has happened, imagine sacrificing your own daughter…

"This is no time to start dissecting our opponent's motives. It's only a matter of time now before OctoberCorp brings their case against Shell. We have to track him down by whatever means necessary. Quickly and discreetly."

–We have no idea of Boiled's whereabouts either. What if he's already with Shell?

"Use whatever pretext you can to track them down. The police are of no use at this stage. The one thing we have going for us is the fact that there are still negotiations that need to take place before OctoberCorp brings its case against Shell."

–Are you planning on having Balot secure Shell's person?

Balot's eyes narrowed. *Secure Shell*—the words reminded Balot of something. What was it the Doctor had said this morning, just before the trial had started?

"Once we have him in our care, use the police or special forces or whatever necessary to cordon off the area."

–If Shell had his memories back, Shell would stop killing people.

–Roger that. Wait, what was that? Shell's memories? Balot, is that you speaking?

–You said so yourself before the trial started, Doctor. Shell can't restrain his own urges because he has no memories.

–Ah…yes, that's right. Shell's amnesia means that his urges grow and grow and have nowhere to go, no escape, that's what we were—

–Will you let me borrow something? I'll be sure to return it safely.

–What's that? Borrow? Are you talking about…

The Doctor gulped.

Oeufcoque took advantage of the small pause to interject. "Doctor, if Balot says she needs something, you trust her judgment and hand it over without further ado. Got that?"

Something seemed to have got the Doctor's tongue for a moment, but eventually he managed to speak.

–Fine, I'll leave Shell's security completely in your hands. The pair of you. Come over to the Broilerhouse to—

His tone of voice changed abruptly.

–Just in! The first information disclosure on Boiled's whereabouts. Shell called Boiled from a pay phone on the banks of the East River. At around seventeen hundred hours. I'm going to publish the fact that we've just had some negotiations *with OctoberCorp ourselves, okay?*

"Do it, Doctor. Force their hand, make them give us as much information as possible."

–There's every chance that Shell is now hiding out somewhere in the vicinity of the phone booth. Let's use the pretext that he may be armed and dangerous in order to force the other side into disclosing his exact location. I'll get the DA to gather what information he can, top secret. So… Balot, I'll have what you need ready for you—just come on over to the Broilerhouse to pick it up.

–Thank you.

The phone cut off. The car sped on toward the Broilerhouse, and the monitor already showed a map that displayed the likely whereabouts of Shell.

03

Shell arrived at the hotel room that Boiled had told him to come to. He sat down on the bed, and the first thing he thought was *Now I can become a different person again*.

He was even prepared. Thoroughly. Or so Shell thought, at least.

He had his overnight Boston bag on his lap, and he pulled out a bottle of Heroic Pills from inside his jacket pocket and washed them down one by one, chugging a bottle of scotch as he did so. The Blue Diamonds on the seven rings on his hands shone brilliantly.

The lenses on his Chameleon Sunglasses were a fawn color.

Before long the bottle of pills dropped out of his hand, and the bottle of scotch tipped over onto the floor, its contents seeping into the carpet.

Why am I here? The question arose as Shell's mind passed into an increasingly euphoric state. *Is it a good or bad thing that I'm here?* Bad, *if you consider that I've lost the battle that I've been fighting for the last few months. But also* good—*that having lost the battle, I'm still here now, safe and sound.*

He'd managed to run away. He had left the horrors firmly behind him and was now in a safe place.

The slate would be wiped clean. The past, so *disagreeable*—all that would be washed away. There were no cracks in his shell—only the contents had been removed.

Shell hugged his Boston bag tight as he was filled with desire for his new life.

What good friends he had! That burly friend of his had proven himself indispensable in helping him to acquire another one of *these*. Helping him turn that crazy woman *into* another one of these. While Shell was strangling the woman in the bath, his burly friend had taken care of all the details. It was wonderful. That other girl might still be chasing after him, but now he would always be able to repel her, destroy her, subsume all thoughts of her.

Shell opened up his bag at one end and stuck a hand inside to feel its contents—newly minted bills. He flipped through a wad of notes, and as the bills brushed against his fingertips he muttered. *You like that, don't you, my little ones? You want some more, don't you?* Then he stopped suddenly and withdrew his hand in haste. The corners of the bills had given him a number of paper cuts on his fingertips, and blood was welling up.

Shell put his bleeding finger in his mouth and sucked away. The taste of his own blood spread to the corners of his mouth. The taste brought to mind vestiges of an old memory. A memory that should have been long since erased, but that clung tenaciously to the void of his inner mind nonetheless.

A giant shadow loomed over Shell as a young boy. Trace memories—all sorts of indecent things being done to him. But he'd always managed to submerge the memories, the feelings, everything, in the girl, whoever she was. He had repelled all, killed all, and turned everything that was dirty *clean*. He was proud of this. This was his life.

He giggled out loud. Uncontrollably, as if his lungs were going into convulsions. *Huhh huhh huhh*. He scrambled around for the bottle of scotch that lay on the floor. "See! That's how I find what I've dropped. I never lose anything. Shell never drops the ball. Ever."

Gleefully, he gulped down the last of the liquid. Then he collapsed face-up on the bed and fell

asleep in his euphoric state.

In Shell's dreams, the faces of all sorts of women appeared and disappeared.

Shell tried to remember each of their names, but the harder he tried the more elusive they became.

Eventually the girls' faces swarmed together in a bizarre montage, and girls would appear with three eyes or with nipples growing out of their noses. Then the melee of body parts all converged into one face. Shell thought that he cried her name out, in his dream.

He felt an emotion welling up—*love*, the sort that makes you want to stick your chest out and hold your head up high. It was for the first woman he had ever truly loved, the one he met only after he'd finally put his mother to rest. Not so much a woman as a girl. But the girl herself had long since disappeared from Shell's memory, leaving only a lingering scent of her in his dreams. A scent full of sorrow. He wanted to make everything clean. What was it that brought the two of them together, that caused their fates to be intertwined so? The fearful, fearsome past?

Or were they simply in love? The sad smell seemed to reject every possible explanation.

A new shadow floated across—the shadow of the girl, dying and wasting away into *nothingness*. Shell's ire was turned toward the girl's father. Shell spent many years tracking him down, and when he'd finally found him, he killed him. But the father's mind had been completely addled by drugs by then, and he couldn't even remember the things he had done to his own daughter.

His memory was gone, just as Shell's was now. Shell had beat him to a pulp before finally snapping his neck.

As Shell did so, he remembered his own memory disappearing. He had already forgotten what he was doing even as he did it. *I'll make everything clean. I'm going to clean you up.* All sorts of possibilities occurred to him at that moment. He thought up a scheme to launder money. He thought of turning the girl into a Blue Diamond. He thought of making the girl *clean* again.

Shell turned the desiccated remains of the girl into a Blue Diamond to wear alongside his mother, and his mind gave up the ghost and his memories faded away completely. His mind may have been in deep turmoil, but he knew how to *use* people.

By the time the diamond was ready, Shell's mind was completely clear. He was relaxed again.

The Blue Diamonds that shone resplendent in the open air—they were Shell's last hope.

In Shell's dreams, the light shining off the diamonds suddenly changed.

The spirits of the girls who were to become diamonds. The ghosts of girls whose names he had long since forgotten. Their faces were closed and expressionless, but this only made them seem more alluring than ever. They stared down at their own laps with dark eyes, as if they were looking for a place to hide themselves. Shell's task was an easy one. All he had to do was give them an appropriate *container*, a final resting place. He would lead the way for them, *guide* them.

Turn them into the most beautiful thing in the world. *But it didn't always go according to plan.*

The girl who had been engulfed by flames came back to life. It was as if she didn't *want* to become clean again.

In his dreams the girl was ablaze and walking toward Shell, step by step, until she finally grabbed hold of him. The fire raged away, centered on the girl, and there was nowhere for Shell to run. Her blackened fingers were around his throat, plastering it with her charred fingerprints.

Shell screamed. More flames erupted inside the girl, and she squeezed down on his throat with a grip that was gentle but strong, so strong.

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Shell bounced up from the bed and realized that there was something on his neck, constricting him, strangling him. He tried to get it off, but his actions were only making things worse.

Then he realized the truth: *he was trying to strangle himself with his own hands.*

His face convulsed in a bitter smile. His whole body was drenched in sweat.

He took off his Chameleon Sunglasses, now shining like moonlight, and placed his Boston bag on the floor.

He realized that he was desperately thirsty and went into the bathroom to wash his face and drink some water.

As he returned to the bedroom he noticed a ringing noise. Not the hotel room phone. Shell jumped for his jacket and scrambled for his cell phone, which he found after a couple seconds' fumbling. "Boiled?"

–Yes.

That sturdy voice. Shell smiled and put his sunglasses back on.

"I've just had the worst dream. Like a bad trip. A girl was on fire and she tried to strangle me," Shell said, relieved that help was now at hand. "Have you prepared everything as I asked you? I'm going to head upstream into a different state. Once I've crossed the state borders, I'm a new person. I'll play it steady from now on. I'll use my money to set up a legit business. No more gambling for me. That's all over."

–I've received a new commission from OctoberCorp. I need to explain it to you clearly. On top of that—

"What are you talking about, Boiled? Who cares about OctoberCorp anymore? I'm leaving this place, saying goodbye forever to the whole damn city. I'm heading back to my roots."

Boiled considered this in silence for a minute before answering.

–I thought that you were born in this city, on the East Side.

"What? Forget about that for now. Home is wherever I hang my hat. If I succeed there, *that's* where my roots are. I don't know where *to*, but I'm heading back *home* now. And I'm grateful to you, Boiled, I really am. If you hadn't been there for me, that girl would have crushed me. Strangled me with her bare hands. I really am grateful. You're a true friend."

–Is that right?

"It is! My only real friend. You're my rock—there's no one I can rely on quite like you. You've saved my neck so many times. Let's stay in touch. Right, Boiled?"

–The PIs for the other side are looking for you right now. We've had to publish your rough location, so they're most probably already in your area. Try not to make yourself too conspicuous. It's probably best you wait until dawn—any ships leaving your area may be tailed. Everything changes if they find you.

Shell's brow furrowed, as if he didn't quite understand Boiled's meaning. "Are you saying you've been feeding them information?"

–Information Disclosure. Unless we publicly share certain stipulated pieces of information, our opposing case won't be approved. I wouldn't be able to work for you.

Shell frowned, rubbing his forehead with his other hand.

"I've got a bit of a headache, and I don't think I'm following you. Here I am telling you that

you're a valued friend to me, one I know would never betray me…"

Boiled was silent again. This time the pause was a long one. Shell thought he could hear the faintest of murmuring from the other side of the phone, but then suddenly the line was cut off. Shell looked at his cell phone with an uneasy expression.

The phone rang again. Surprised, Shell put it to his ear. "Boiled? What are you playing at?"

–I don't want to die.

It was the voice of a girl. Shell stopped breathing. He felt as if the blood had frozen in his veins.

–But still you kill me.

Shell's mouth was agape and his heart beat furiously.

The image of the girl in flames came rushing back. The girl who took his precious chips, her face ablaze. Her name too flamed back into his mind.

There was a noise at his ear that gradually came together in the form of a man's voice.

–Mr. Shell…

It was Boiled. Tears of relief flooded Shell's eyes. "What was that voice just then? Was it trying to scare me?"

–You're listening in on this line, aren't you, Oeufcoque? You're near Shell right now, right?

"What? What's that? God damn it, I'm asking you a question, Boiled, answer me!"

–I'll take care of you, Oeufcoque. Go and retrieve your bait. Then I'll appear. That's how we'll do this.

Shell shook his head. The area at the back of his head and neck throbbed with pain.

–Very well, Boiled. We'll secure Shell's person from our side.

A new voice echoed down the line, one that Shell had never heard before, and he was hit with another bolt of fear. His whole body was now drenched in his own cold sweat.

–We've already finished evacuating the other guests from the hotel. We are going to solve this case according to official procedure. In order to do so we need to ensure that Shell remains safe. We have no desire to fight with you, Boiled.

–We are just tools, Oeufcoque, born into this world in order to create nihility. You're a self-aware tool, and I'm a human who wants to become a gun. Even your current user really wants to be able to use you to kill. She just wants to do so legally, that's all.

–Stop talking such garbage, Boiled. What are you hoping to achieve by killing Shell? What use is there in massacring everyone in sight? What will be born of that?

Shell frowned.

–It's not my job to be concerned about what may or may not be born, Oeufcoque.

–So you're throwing your lot in with OctoberCorp, are you? That's your choice*, is it, Boiled?*

"Boiled! Are you planning to *kill* me? You are, aren't you? You're planning to kill me!"

–Mr. Shell. I really do think we would have worked well together. We could have been far more than just patron and client…

Shell's face twisted. Boiled continued in his characteristic whispering tones.

–It's a shame that circumstances have changed.

Then there was another noise—a number of sounds screeching together. The phone went dead.

Shell stood rooted to the spot, the lenses in his Chameleon Sunglasses changing from pale blue to stormy black. Everything was unreal, a dream, but then Shell snapped to and snatched up his Boston bag and checked its side pocket for the reassuring feel of cold steel.

He pulled his automatic handgun out, not even bothering to check the magazine before pressing it down against his leg, then hauled his bag over his shoulder. He felt more rooted, more secure.

Suddenly his cell phone started ringing again. Shell gritted his teeth and answered.

–This is Oeufcoque-Penteano here, PI and Trustee for this case. We are going to take you into our protection. Remain there until we secure a safe route for your escape. When we arrive, we will expect you to hand over all your weapons and come peacefully.

"Fuck off!" Shell yelled, flinging his phone to the floor and grinding it with his foot. The phone was destroyed, the sound cut off.

Breathing roughly, his shoulders heaving up and down, Shell ran around the room quickly to turn all the lights out.

The bedroom was on the second floor. Shell hid behind the curtains, peeking out of the window to try and catch a glimpse of what was happening outside.

The lights in the room all flared back on. Suddenly, of their own accord. Shell watched in shock. The night lamp was on, the bathroom light was on, and the ventilator in the bathroom was on, roaring. Shell's face was soaking wet—it was impossible to tell where the sweat ended and the tears started.

Then there was another sound. It was the old television, right next to Shell. There was white noise, and then the image of a girl appeared on the screen. Her mouth opened in a round shape, and her wide eyes and rigid fingers seemed like they were about to reach out for Shell's throat at any moment.

–I didn't want to die.

Shell watched in horror with bloodshot eyes as he listened to the girl's voice.

–But I was killed by you anyway.

Shell pointed his gun at the television and fired repeatedly. The monitor exploded, and sparks flew out into the room. The image of the girl and her voice were wiped cleanly away. He had made everything clean. Clean—and he felt his gut wrenching inside. His mouth was filled with the taste of sour liquid, and he bent over double and vomited copiously.

His body heaved repeatedly, and sticky yellow liquid drooled from his mouth.

When he had finished, Shell stood back up and fired a shot at the ceiling light and at the bathroom light. He put his hand to the doorknob and gripped it tight.

He was so frightened that his hair practically stood on end. There was a horrifying shade on the other side of the door, he *knew* it. The *thing* that he had always fought to repel, to make disappear—it was back, alive again, and standing right there.

Shell flung open the door with all his might and jumped out, brandishing his gun. He was confronted by an empty corridor.

Shell's last remaining shards of reason forced him to notice that something was very strange about this whole situation.

Despite all the noise and gunfire coming from his room, there was not a single person about.

There was no sign of commotion.

He was suddenly struck by the feeling that whichever way he tried to go now, whatever he tried to do, the outcome would be the same.

A horrible place to be. *Flashbacks*—his whole body convulsed at the thought that he would never, *could* never, take another step again.

–Please do as I ask—it makes things so much more inconvenient otherwise.

The voice came from behind him, and Shell jumped. His whole body seemed to shriek. Shell's eyes darted around looking for the source of the voice as if his life depended on it.

–You see down there? Room 202? It seems that you can use one of its windows to jump across to the next building.

The voice was coming from the intercom of the room he had just stepped out of.

He shot it, almost instinctively. Past the door and straight into the intercom. His bullets had run out before he even knew it. Shell stuck his hand back into his bag.

Some money fell out, bills fluttering about. Shell found the spare magazine he was looking for and reloaded his gun with a trembling hand, making for the elevator as he did so.

He had absolutely no idea what he should do next. If he saw something that moved, he planned to shoot it. His mind couldn't conceive of anything other than *to kill*.

He pressed the button and an elevator appeared almost immediately. Shell suppressed a wave of nausea and jumped aboard. His fingers shook uncontrollably as he lifted them up to the buttons. Eventually he managed to steady them long enough to press the button for the first floor. But the door wouldn't close. On the other side of the door was a wide stretch of open corridor that ran both left and right. He felt hopelessly trapped.

–You do make us work for it, don't you? The first floor of the hotel is closed, off-limits. The emergency stairs, now, they would have been one thing. But I really didn't expect you to try the elevator.

The voice was coming from inside the elevator. Shell held his breath, and a beat later his mouth was filled with sour liquid again. He kept it down, trying to steady his gun.

"What are you? Where are you speaking from?" Shell realized where the voice was coming from almost immediately after he said the words—the elevator's emergency circuits.

–I'm inside the building behind this hotel. Come over here and you'll have any number of escape routes.

"Who are you?"

–I'm one of the private investigators in charge of this case. A Trustee. Just think of me as someone you want to do business with.

"A PI…" Shell took a deep breath. His forehead was pounding. He squeezed his gun tightly and asked another question. "Are you planning to kill me?"

–On the contrary. You should think of me as your only friend for miles around.

"What sort of business are you talking about? What is it you want with me?"

–We'll discuss that properly once you follow our escape route and make it out of there safely. Hmm, room 202 is no good anymore. I can sense that Boiled is watching it. Anyway, all you need to know is that I'm here to preserve your life. In return, we expect you to cooperate fully as an effective witness on our side. We will expect you to pay for your own crimes in full, of course.

"What are you talking about? How are you going to get me out of here? Where are you taking

me?"

–Try and stay calm. Room 207—the bathroom window there. You should be able to reach the window of the building on the other side.

Shell's breathing was all over the place, but he made up his mind, and with flashing eyes he stepped out of the elevator.

He made a beeline for room 207. He reached for the doorknob, and the moment before he touched it he heard a click. The electronic lock had been lifted. Shell pushed the door with the muzzle of his gun, and it swung lazily into the room.

There was no sign of life inside the room. No trace of a person that might have opened the lock on the door. Shell entered the bathroom as ordered.

There was, indeed, a window there. He looked out of it, and it did seem that he might be able to cross over to the next building. Shell shot the window frame to dislodge it, then kicked the whole window out of the building. A musty wind blew in from outside.

Shell stuck his head out through the rectangular space, and, bag still on his shoulder, he maneuvered awkwardly, stretching his leg out toward the next building, where an open window was already awaiting him.

His outstretched leg reached the window frame, and then his gun-wielding hand. Finally, he shifted his weight in one movement.

He was in. He dropped down from the window ledge, which was higher up relative to the floor than he had anticipated. He landed with a thud.

His Boston bag slipped off his shoulder, and Shell thought he would collapse from the impact, but he managed to stay upright.

There were no lights on in the room, but the natural light from the window was just about enough for Shell to make out his new surroundings. It looked like some sort of abandoned store. It was completely bare, with visible cracks running across the concrete walls. A number of large windows lined one of the walls, and there was a cross marked out in tape.

Shell suddenly realized that he was standing on something soft. He looked down and noticed that various objects were scattered across the concrete floor. He hoisted one of them up with the tip of his gun.

It was a dull piece of cloth. He looked closer and realized that it was a skirt.

Farther along was a blouse. Even farther along—and his eyes came across a sight that made him jump.

A white coat, fluttering in the darkness.

He thrust his gun out quickly, and the skirt on its end fell to the floor.

At the end of his muzzle was a girl.

A girl encased from top to toe in white. She was looking his way.

"Rune-Balot…"

Shell called out the name of the girl that should have died in his dreams.

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Shell's Chameleon Sunglasses were in the middle of transforming from blue to red.

"Why, here… Why are you in a place such as this?" Shell's inflamed red eyes stared at her in shock from behind the sunglasses. He kept his gun trained on her.

Without a word, Balot raised her hand for Shell to see.

In her hand was a cell phone. She tossed it over to him.

The phone bounced off his bag, and he caught it reflexively. Its monitor showed that a second had already passed since a call had been initiated. It was on. Shell frowned, puzzled, and put the phone to his ear.

–This is PI Oeufcoque here. Hand all your weapons over to the girl in front of you. Do so and you'll be recognized as a cooperating witness for our second case, and the Life Preservation Program will take effect in order to protect you.

"Where are you? Why won't you show yourself?"

–I'm near enough. Don't trouble yourself. Or would you rather take your chances with your old Trustee, now that your contract has been well and truly broken? He's under a new contract with OctoberCorp now, and I imagine he will take your life the moment he gets the opportunity.

"You say you're 'near enough'? Well, can you see what I'm doing now, then?" Shell's glinting eyes were on Balot. A crooked smile crossed his lips, and he stretched out his gun hand so that the muzzle was pointing straight at Balot's face.

Balot stared at Shell and his gun. She seemed, if anything, a little disappointed.

–What are you hoping to achieve by doing that? Do you really want to die? This is your last chance to save yourself, you know.

"That's right! This *is* my last chance! A woman is a gambler's jinx!" Shell was shouting, like a drowning man calling for help. "Oeufcoque. I remember that name. Boiled called you a talkative mouse. Who gives a shit anymore why you don't want to show yourself? Anyone who's so dumb as to leave a girl unprotected like this needs to be taught a lesson on how to *negotiate*."

–You can try negotiating if you like, but you won't get what you want, not that way. We have so much more firepower than you.

Shell's face warped into another sneer. He looked like he'd been hit in the face with a sledgehammer.

"Stop fucking with me! Come on out and face me like a man! Fuck me about any longer and I'll shoot the little bitch!"

–Oeufcoque. He's threatening me. My life is in danger.

The cell phone suddenly spoke in a girl's voice. A cold, indifferent voice.

Balot's left hand rose up toward Shell. Her white glove squelched and became something else. It took only a moment, and then, as if by magic, Balot was holding a gun in her hand.

Shell froze in shock. The trigger of Balot's gun clicked into place of its own accord. That was all it took. A shot rang out. From Shell—he couldn't keep it in anymore.

Balot didn't flinch. She just pulled the trigger quietly.

There was an explosion of sparks. Shell had no idea what was happening. The bullets met in a flash of steel fragments, acrid smoke filling the surrounding space.

Balot fired again. And again. Shell managed to fire another shot back, not that it had much effect. Balot allowed it to hit her body at the top of her shoulder, where it disintegrated into another mass of sparks. It was as if she were deliberately showing him how impenetrable her defense—*her shell*—was.

In the meantime, Balot fired coolly and repeatedly at Shell.

Shell staggered backward in a grotesque dance. His Boston bag was pierced by the bullets, but the thick wads of notes shielded him, saving his life. His money was protecting him to the end, keeping him out of harm's way quite literally.

Balot fired again and again, always aiming precisely for where the bundles were the thickest.

Shell was like a sandbag now and took the volley of bullets, not even allowed to fall down.

Balot's supply of bullets was virtually inexhaustible. Shell's supply of banknotes was not.

Eventually, Balot brought her volley to a close. Shell collapsed backwards, and millions of tiny fragments of what used to be his bag were scattered around the area, mixed with the confetti that moments before had been Shell's money.

Balot closed in slowly on Shell, now a pathetic figure on the floor taking sniveling breaths.

Suddenly Shell raised his head, gritted his teeth, and thrust his gun out again. His hands and face were covered with scraps of banknotes, pasted to him with his own sweat.

His trembling hand pulled the trigger, but Balot could see his movement as if it were in slow motion.

She shot the bullet down in front of her as easily as if it had been a balloon.

The bullets met, and the impact caused red and yellow sparks to fly.

Before the sparks had even finished dying down, Balot had put three bullets into Shell's hand with lethal accuracy: through the grip and into his index, middle, and ring fingers respectively.

The rest of the bullets in Shell's magazine exploded, bathing the room in their incandescent white light. His fingers were torn off, and the Blue Diamonds glistened like tears as they rolled to the floor, still attached to their fingers.

Shell collapsed.

His Chameleon Sunglasses were a deep scarlet as they smashed against the floor, and their fragments scattered like blood. His quivering right hand no longer had a single finger attached to it. His days as a *sharp*—a professional gambler—were over. The right side of his face was shredded by steel shrapnel from the explosion.

Balot stared at Shell and the state he was in.

Shell could barely breathe. The right side of his face was drenched in black and reflecting light. Perhaps he was crying.

Balot knelt down next to him and reached out with her left hand, the one that held the gun.

Shell tried weakly to wriggle away from her. As he did so, the gun in Balot's hand squelched and disappeared. Something else appeared in its place.

Shell's eyes focused on it with trepidation.

It was the thing that Balot had received from the Doctor at the Broilerhouse. Or rather, *things*. Four of them. The four storage devices used in Shell's *Clapping,* his memory extraction operations. The chips. Shell's eyes grew wider and wider.

–Here you are. I want you to have these back.

Shell's eyes moved slowly from the chips up to Balot's face. Balot touched Shell's temple with her right hand. She located the terminal. The fiberoptic circuit that connected straight to Shell's brain.

Balot *snarced*.

Shell's body bent backward and went rigid. His eyes opened so wide that it seemed as if his eyeballs might pop out of his skull, but instead they started flickering rapidly.

Without her realizing it, Balot's left hand had closed tightly over her four chips.

Her right hand was still pressed against his temple, and before long Balot had got the measure of the circuits to Shell's brain.

–Everything that you've lost, I'm going to give back to you.

Balot took the vast amount of information contained in her left hand and started to feed it through the circuits and into Shell's brain. Carefully, so as not to overload or damage anything.

At first Shell didn't understand what was happening, but soon his face started twitching, and a crazed voice leaked out.

"Stop it…"

His eyes rolled back in his head so that only the whites showed. An unearthly scream left his mouth. A cry of despair. His mouth started frothing, then bubbled up, and blood poured from his nostrils.

Balot remained silent and continued to feed Shell's memories back into his mind. His destroyed *gestalt* was gradually reconstructed, and even his paralyzed nerve circuits were being repaired electronically.

It wasn't possible to manipulate his nerve cells directly, of course, but it was possible to restore the outlines of all the events that had taken place, with details of how they all related to each other, memories of the sights and sounds and smells and other stimuli.

Shell's scream continued for a long time. This was the man who had voluntarily chosen to be an empty husk of a man, but Balot was now forcibly pumping the rotten contents that he'd been turning away from for so long back into him.

Eventually Shell was all screamed out, but the operation continued unabated for about thirty minutes. Only because of Balot's incredible aptitude was such a speed possible.

Her glove squelched and swallowed up the chips again for safekeeping.

When she was finished, Balot touched the still-unconscious Shell's head and communicated directly via the circuits in his brain.

–If you take good enough care of it then even a rotten egg might eventually come back to life.

Shell slept. Throughout the whole operation, from start to end, he hadn't even looked at Balot once. Just like when he'd waved goodbye to her from outside the car that trapped her. He hadn't really been looking at her—only his own reflection. *You reap what you sow*, Balot thought, and then she realized that this applied to herself as well. She had never loved Shell and never wanted to. All she had ever wanted was *to be loved*.

She felt a great void disappear—where there had been a sorrowful emptiness inside her, now she was feeling complete again.

The very next instant she sensed something approaching the building they were in. She gulped.

It was *threat* personified. A cold killing machine in the shape of a giant. And it was drawing near.

"Boiled is coming…" Oeufcoque murmured, for he too had sensed the impending danger.

Balot nodded. She felt overwhelming pressure bearing in on her from all around, and she shivered. For a moment she forgot about Shell, forgot about herself, forgot about the dead girls and their accursed lives—everything was wiped cleanly from her mind.

For that alone, Balot found herself feeling almost thankful.

–All air traffic has been cut off! Boiled has put in a thousand different investigation requests to the aviation authorities!

Balot heard the Doctor's voice shouting down the cell phone in frustration. "Investigating the airways? What's he playing at?" asked Oeufcoque.

–It's not the investigations themselves that are important. He's sent in aerial camera crews, weather balloons, that sort of thing, so as to block off all the flight paths. Humpty can't get permission to enter any airspace on safety grounds. I can exercise my rights as a Trustee to get them out of the area, but it'll take time for the messages to get through. Too much time. We've fallen right into his trap. What do we do?

"We prepare to defend ourselves and try to escape. What else is there? Even if the police were to come to our aid, there's no guarantee that we'd be able to keep Shell to ourselves. If OctoberCorp has its way, Shell will be shot dead on the spot. There's nothing else to do—we have to protect Shell," Oeufcoque said, as businesslike as possible.

Balot could tell, though, that Oeufcoque was worried—and suffering for it. She listened to the conversation, tuning in to Oeufcoque's feelings as he spoke to the Doctor in the form of a cell phone in her hands.

She sensed Boiled moving toward them somewhere outside the building. He would stop now and then to touch the building, and every time he did so Balot felt it as keenly as if it were her own body he was touching. He was closing in on them, like a grand master seeking out the opening that would allow him to checkmate.

Oeufcoque and the Doctor conversed quickly now. Oeufcoque kept a level head throughout. At no point did he even consider the possibility of giving up the case. This saved Balot—and gave her an answer to the question *What should I do?*

Outside the building, Boiled was moving in a peculiar way, cutting off their escape routes as he closed in.

There was only one of him. There should have been any number of ways they could have run. And yet there was no escape route. It was as if they were surrounded by an army of a hundred.

This was another answer to Balot's question.

–I'll protect us all.

Oeufcoque and the Doctor fell silent as Balot *snarced* the phone.

–How long until you can get here, Doctor?

–Two hours should be—no, I'll make it there in an hour. Believe me.

–Sure. I believe you. I won't run away.

–No, no, if it gets too dangerous then please do run away. I'm begging you.

–All right.

–I'm trusting in you, Balot, Oeufcoque. I'll be there to pick you up as soon I can.

The conversation ended and the display on the cell phone went blank. Balot placed it on the floor.

"What exactly are you planning?"

–Please, help me with this.

Balot *snarced* her bodysuit to speak to Oeufcoque.

Shell had received rudimentary first aid—he was bandaged up and laid out on the concrete floor at Balot's feet.

He looked almost like a mummy. He was trussed up in bandages, gauze, and ropes that bound his arms and legs. All *Made by Oeufcoque*.

Perhaps due to the magnitude of the memories that had just been crammed back into his mind, Shell showed no sign of moving or regaining consciousness.

He might have been drowning in a sea of dreams from his murky past, but his face was tranquil as he slept. Balot felt a pang of relief—perhaps it *was* true. Now that he had his memories back, his murderous urges might finally subside.

Balot knelt down to pick up Shell, who was as limp as a rolled-up carpet. Oeufcoque helped her. Here and there her bodysuit *turned* into a metal exoskeleton to support Shell's weight.

Balot propped the sleeping Shell over her shoulder and went to the garbage disposal chute in one corner of the room. Checking first that there was no shredder or pulverizer at the other end, she lifted Shell's body into the opening, holding on to him by the lapel of his shirt.

"Aren't you going to let him go?"

–Not yet.

Oeufcoque realized immediately what Balot meant by this. He was genuinely impressed.

She was waiting for the right moment. If Boiled was trying to ensnare them, she'd ensnare him back. Shrewd tactics—it was a gamble that relied on split-second timing.

She confirmed that Boiled was just about to enter through the front door, and she knew the moment was right.

–Bye-bye, Shell.

Balot *snarced* the words into Shell's brain and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

At the same time she let go. Shell's body slid down the chute, making a screeching sound as it did so before landing with a dull thud at the other end.

Boiled stopped still outside the front door. He touched the wall with his hand so that he could grasp what was going on, and it was clear he was considering what had just happened. Boiled understood Balot's intentions. He also understood just how serious she was. Boiled walked closer to the front door.

Suddenly Balot's knees started to wobble. She was gripped with the fear that came from knowing that she had burnt her last bridge—thrown away her last chance to escape. She opened her voiceless mouth to breathe in deeply, bringing herself back from the verge of panic.

Oeufcoque called out to her. "Balot." Balot squeezed her bodysuit tight.

–There are lots of people I've wanted to be loved *by. But you're the only one I've ever wanted to love myself.*

She spoke to Oeufcoque as she sensed him covering her whole body. She showed him her will, and her courage.

–I know the person we're fighting now used to be a friend of yours, so I'll do my best to stop him without hurting him too much.

Oeufcoque seemed to be *inhaling* Balot's very intentions. To face an enemy as powerful as Boiled with the handicap of merely trying to disarm him—that was virtually suicide, a death wish.

Boiled would ruthlessly exploit any perceived weakness to drive his advantage home.

Balot hugged her bodysuit still tighter. It was the weapon that covered her. Snug and tight.

–I won't kill him. I won't be killed. I won't let him kill.

This was what she had learned from Oeufcoque, after all, and it was the only answer that she could give.

"We won't kill. We won't be killed. We won't let him kill," Oeufcoque repeated, as if it were some sort of mantra. "That's an extremely difficult task we've set ourselves. But…it's worth trying."

Slowly Balot took her hands away from her shoulders and placed them back at her sides.

"I've got a good partner."

With that, Balot felt Oeufcoque *turn* again. He wrapped Balot thoroughly, to protect her and to be her weapon, ready to respond instantly to her *snarc*.

Balot *snarced* her left glove. A metallic mass appeared. She gripped it tightly and felt its weight become part of her body. Balot and Oeufcoque were one.

≡

Balot remembered how it was she used to survive.

Bad customers and good customers, she used to act in the same way: she just killed her breath and waited.

Waiting until she became used to it. Releasing herself into space. So that her heart wouldn't be trapped in one place. It was harrowing in the extreme. Looking back, she was amazed at herself for putting up with so much.

It was all different now. And yet it was also the same. She had to do something. If she stopped her own breath, she knew she would die. But if she lost her focus on her opponent, she would also die. There was no point now in trying to escape from the reality that *she was here*. If she tried to box her heart up and put it somewhere for safekeeping, it would mean she wouldn't be able to be here *right now*. She just couldn't afford to hide her heart away.

She kept a steady rhythm, extending her consciousness, searching for a road to victory, letting go.

She took a quiet breath in. Then out. She sensed that Boiled had reached the top of the stairs. She felt the temperature in the room drop. Such was the creature that now stood on the other side of the thin door.

"I'm disappointed…" A voice came from beyond the door. A thick, heavy voice—one that she could have heard wherever she stood. "I anticipated that you would kill Shell for me."

Something about the way Boiled spoke struck Balot as being very incongruous.

"You know the way I do things."

The words pressed down on her now. Her breathing slipped, and she corrected herself, ensuring she maintained her breathing rhythm at all costs. Suddenly Balot realized why Boiled's words had struck her as being so strange.

"Tweedledee was delighted to have found someone like you. Someone the same as him," said Boiled.

Boiled was speaking directly to Balot, and to Balot alone. He had always spoken to Oeufcoque in the past.

"I'm delighted too, for the same reasons," continued Boiled.

The air in the room went from cold to freezing. The oppressive air threatened to rob Balot of all her senses. But Balot was prepared for this. She felt a moment's opening within the rhythm that she had been keeping, and she knew she had to take it. She knew that Boiled would be ready too. She had to bet everything on that fearful moment. She steadied her gun.

Balot realized all too well that she was hoping against hope for the jackpot. Boiled's jackpot—she had to wait for him to make the first move. After all, she could fire as many bullets as she liked at him, thousands, but they'd all be deflected.

Her only choice was to aim for the instant that Boiled couldn't generate his *PseudoGravitational Float*. The instant that he fired his own gun.

With those thoughts running through her head, Balot started firing. Over and over. Aiming for his gun hand.

The fateful bullets should have flown straight toward Boiled, blowing his own bullets off course along the way.

But Balot realized that something had gone wrong. It wasn't only the air that felt as cold as ice—now the cold was encroaching on her heart.

Boiled hadn't fired. She'd fallen for his feint. A circle opened up in the door, a circumference of bullet holes. The bullets that Balot had fired that were supposed to converge on one single point. Balot immediately crossed her arms to protect her face. A moment later she felt the impact.

Boiled's bullet slammed into her crossed arms.

She flew backward.

The shock pummeled her very consciousness just as much as it did her flesh.

The door flew open and Boiled piled into the room.

Balot was numb, but the impact of the giant figure entering her territory brought her abruptly back to her senses.

She fell onto her back and rolled backward farther still to absorb the shock, then stood right back up again. She moved like a prima ballerina, leaving everything to her body's instincts and to the suit that covered her. She stopped thinking with her mind and went with the flow.

She checked that both arms were still working fine, which they were. She had been far enough away.

Oeufcoque was just strong enough to protect Balot from bullets fired from a distance. It would have been a different story at point-blank range.

Boiled moved in to close that distance. Balot's eyes filled with the giant man advancing on her with murderous intent.

Balot suppressed the fear and scowled. She *snarced* Boiled with all her might, as if she were baring her teeth. He noticed just in time.

Boiled's whole body jumped up, like a football, and he *fell* to the ceiling. He twisted his body around so that he was just out of range of Balot's *snarc*. On the ceiling. Only a few meters away.

Still, he was too far for her to try and penetrate his gravity shield and *snarc* the technology inside him.

At the same time, though, Boiled was too far away to be able to pierce Balot's bodysuit with his gun. It was a deadly standoff, and whichever one of them could get *just* in range in order to fire

the fatal blow *just* in time would emerge victorious.

Again Balot unloaded the contents of her gun at Boiled. He ran across the ceiling and hid himself behind a pillar.

Balot fired at the pillar in a reflex reaction. No sooner had she done so did she realize that this was Boiled's second feint. He had already started running down the pillar, and he extended his arm and a cacophonous roar exploded.

She may have been able to sense his location, but she couldn't predict which way he would move in his three-dimensional space.

Balot's mind went blank as she sprang to the side.

The artillery-shell-like bullet grazed her shoulder. A small corner of her suit tore off and burst into yellow flame. But Boiled's bullet had still missed her actual body.

Balot rolled away to a safe distance, but as she did so Boiled kicked against the pillar he was climbing down and flew sideways across the room. Or rather, he *fell* sideways, toward one of the walls.

Balot simply couldn't tell what was coming next, and she hastily battled down the growing, treacherous feelings of inadequacy that were about to erupt inside her. Immediately she reached out and grasped the situation in the room, as if to convince herself to believe in her own abilities again.

Her opponent could move as he liked. The important thing to Balot was that *she* knew where *she* was.

Balot's mind flipped through all the places in the room that were likely to put her at the greatest advantage. In barely a second she had determined her spot, and she ran for it.

A battle of life and death was essentially a battle of will. If your will was taken away from you, so was your ability to move. *That's* how you became so pathetically incapable of even lifting a finger. Well, Balot wasn't about to let that happen to her a second time.

Balot ran, and as she did so she gave up on the idea of trying to predict Boiled's next move. Just as she would give up on a busted hand in blackjack and turn her mind to a new hand that she *might* stand a chance of winning. Instead of trying to second-guess Boiled's position, she would make sure that her own position was as good as it could be. She continued toward her perfect position, the place she knew she could *use*, and as she did so she fired off a number of shots at Boiled as a feint, to try and distract him from her maneuver.

Balot was seeking the perfect moment, a single opportunity. She needed split-second accuracy and willpower to find the chink in Boiled's armor, so that she could fire her arrow of Paris at his Achilles' heel.

All while Boiled was in turn cutting off her escape routes and looking for *his* opening.

When Balot tried to slip behind a pillar, Boiled was one step ahead of her. He broke into a run across the wall and jumped. He was like a giant jaguar on the trail of a fawn in the headlights. It was the *danse macabre*. He landed on the ceiling and took three more leaps, as if he were moving along a carefully choreographed path. With his final step, his upper body spun around, and he thrust out his gun in a final pose.

With the muzzle trained on Balot's unprotected back, he put his finger on the trigger, ready to fire.

That same instant the darkness all around flared up white, and the brightness assaulted Boiled's eyes.

Balot had *snarced* one of the lights in the ceiling, judging the timing just right.

Boiled's eyes narrowed. The light was coming from right below him, making it impossible to see Balot in her white bodysuit.

Boiled's eyes darted from left to right to try and locate her, his finger hovering over the trigger. Just then he heard a loud noise somewhere overhead, on the floor.

He honed in the muzzle on the sound and fired. Then he gasped. A reflex action, without thought or meaning behind it.

Boiled's shot pulverized its target. Only thing was, the target was the cell phone that Balot had placed on the floor just a moment ago. She had *snarced* its ringtone to play. Balot *herself*, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Boiled realized immediately that he was in a trap. He prepared to move but found his whole world plunged into darkness again. Balot had used her *snarc* for the third time in quick succession, turning the lights off again.

Boiled lost his bearings, so sudden was the darkness in which he had been engulfed.

He realized what Balot was up to.

She was right underneath him. Both arms above her head, pointing her gun right at him. She had given up trying to anticipate his movements and in doing so had found herself the perfect position. She had *doubled down*, staking everything. But even as Boiled had temporarily lost the use of his eyesight due to the sudden light and dark, his years of training and experience as a soldier kicked in, and he *was* able to anticipate Balot's next move.

Balot fired her gun so quickly that fire seemed to dance around the muzzle. A fraction of a second later, Boiled crouched down, activating his *PGF,* using it as instant body armor.

Balot's first few shots squeezed past, just before the impenetrable shield had been fully activated. Bullets pierced Boiled's right arm and leg, causing fragments of material from his jacket to flutter to the floor. But that was all. The rest of the bullets had their flight paths diverted, creating a ring of bullet holes that encircled Boiled on the ceiling where he crouched.

Even as his body took the bullets, Boiled removed his gun from under his right arm and aimed. He wasn't relying on his eyes anymore, but even so he had a perfect shot at Balot's chest. Balot sensed Boiled looming in the darkness and shuddered.

Had the first few bullets that had slipped past the impenetrable shield managed to hit home in Boiled's head or heart, the outcome might have been different. Or if the bullets had been of a higher caliber, powerful enough to blow off his arms and legs… But now was no time for excuses. The simple fact was that the moment Boiled had worked out Balot's position based on her actions, he'd seen through her. Her double down had failed spectacularly. Bust.

Balot scrambled away as quickly as she could, desperately trying to put distance between herself and her giant oppressor. She was also simultaneously *snarcing* her gun to make it larger, give it a bigger aperture—all unconsciously, of course; it was a manifestation of her earlier shiver of fear.

A deadly roar assaulted her. A bullet slammed into her left breast and she went flying backward. It was almost as if it were the noise itself that was forcing her back.

Balot was saved by her positioning. She smashed into one of the taped-up glass windows.

The window crumbled into fragments, and light scattered all around. Had it been a wall that she'd hit, there would have been nowhere for the shock to travel, and her rib cage would have shattered. But because the bullet threw Balot into the air and out of the building, much of the

energy was dissipated and the impact to her body was lessened.

Her bodysuit had hardened instantly to form a defensive breastplate, and this now crumbled away, having absorbed the shock. At the same time the hems of her bodysuit spun out new material, wrapping Balot up as she scrunched herself into a ball in midair as she fell through the window and toward the ground below.

A giant white egg formed around her and bounced like a rubber ball against the street.

Two or three times it bounced, hitting the wall of the building on the other side of the street. A crack appeared in the egg. The white bulletproof container opened up and Balot emerged. Her hems returned to normal, and fragments of shock-absorbent material fell off her like powder.

She sensed Boiled pointing his gun at her from the other side of the window. In a slick, inevitable movement, Balot fired at him. Boiled fired. The bullets clashed, and Boiled's deflected round hurtled into a lamppost. The lamppost toppled and smashed into the street, scattering shards of debris.

As this was happening, Balot *summoned* a shield. A car—headlights blazing—sped over to her to hide her body. It took the bullets meant for her, its door smashed and hood crushed. Balot jumped out of the way just in time to see its gas tank igniting and spewing out a tongue of fire.

Across the fire, she sensed Boiled jumping down from the window.

Balot summoned another car just before he landed. Not as a *shield* this time—the car's lights flashed on and off aggressively as it hurtled toward the spot Boiled was going to land on.

Boiled fired at it the moment he landed. One of the tires blew, and the car flipped onto its side and careened into a telephone booth before slamming into the storefront of a multi-purpose building.

Hiding behind the wall of fire, Balot focused her senses on how much damage Boiled had taken.

Two bullets to his right upper arm, one to his right thigh. Blood was spilling from the wounds, dripping down his arm and leg.

Even so, the walking menace known as Boiled loomed as threatening as ever.

Voices were heard—townspeople, tentatively emerging from nearby buildings, reacting to the commotion. Then a voice closer to home—an old man emerged from the entrance hall that had been wrecked by the car. He was yelling something and brandishing a shotgun.

Balot stared at him in surprise, but Boiled's left hand was casually lifted up and pointed right at him…

Balot fired as quickly as she could to stop Boiled. Boiled was forced to activate his anti-gravity shield, which changed the flight path of his own ferocious bullet—instead of taking out the old man, the bullet slammed into the wall of the building right next to him. The old man was thrown, and his shotgun fired off in a random direction, smashing the shop window of a building on the other side of the street. The old man collapsed in fright, and a couple of younger men jumped out of the building he had emerged from and hastily dragged him back inside.

"When monsters like us fight each other, civilians only get in the way," Boiled muttered, and fired at the wrecked car now embedded in the storefront. The hydrogen-powered engine, so typical in the River Side district, didn't stand a chance. The car flared up and the whole building trembled violently.

That was all it took for the remaining bystanders to run back into the safety of their buildings. Boiled and Balot were the only two people left in the street on the whole block.

Boiled ejected his empty cartridge, and it clattered to the ground with a metallic ring. He used his blood-soaked right hand to pull out a speed loader from his pockets and effortlessly reloaded his gun.

"As long as the gunfire continues, the police around here will keep their distance." His voice was as eerily calm as ever. "Let's finish what we started."

He shook his revolver sideways. The cylinder was now back in position.

For a moment Boiled seemed to Balot not only inhuman but something quite otherworldly. His face was blank. His eyes were utterly ruthless, glinting with fire. His limbs were as steel, impervious to pain. And his heart was an engine fueled by hatred and murderous intent, its only purpose to combust and consume all in an explosion of *nothingness*.

Balot bit down hard on her lip. She tried desperately to avoid taking to heart the phrase Boiled had just spoken so casually. *Monsters like us*.

It *was* true that both Boiled and Balot existed somewhere between human and machine. But Boiled was one step farther down the line—his heart was like a machine too, cold and unfeeling in the face of death. No, that wasn't quite true—it killed in *anticipation* of some sort of feeling. *That* was what made him the monster.

Balot forced herself to keep her rhythm, taking deep, deliberate breaths. Her body was hot, her heart aflame.

She was so hot she wouldn't have been surprised if the magazine she ejected from her gun glowed a bright red.

She took her right hand off her gun and made her right glove *turn* into another gun.

She held both guns up and concentrated on Boiled's current position.

Balot knew a second before he moved that Boiled was about to break into a run. This time, she was considering not only the best position for her but the position that Boiled would be looking for too. *This* would be the key to how they maneuvered in their deadly dance.

A number of gunshots were fired almost simultaneously—they echoed as one. Boiled's shot, Balot's many.

She was using the gun in her right hand now. The gun in her left hand was her bankroll—her reserve, for when she needed it the most.

Bullets met in midair; they clashed, crumbled, ricocheted. The remainder of Balot's volley of bullets was deflected harmlessly.

They both ran, circling round, trying to outflank each other.

Balot activated her *snarc*, and Boiled kicked hard against the ground. His massive frame flew up an incredible distance, *landing* on the wall of the building behind her.

Balot knew what position he was heading for even before he got there. She had readied her gun to fire long before he landed and was moving much faster now. She fired.

Boiled didn't return fire. Instead, his right hand pulled something out of his pocket.

"Faceman was right about you. Every time you experience combat, your abilities develop in all sorts of unpredictable ways," Boiled muttered. He was acknowledging Balot's ever-increasing abilities, as if he could keep them in check by the mere act of recognizing them.

Or it could have been something else, something simpler. Perhaps this was the only situation in which Boiled was ever able to speak to anyone in a friendly manner. He could only experience intimacy when earnestly trying to take the life of another, when under attack himself.

"I'm going to have to contain those abilities."

He tossed the object in his hand to the ground. For a moment, Balot thought he had simply discarded a spent magazine.

Boiled's tactics were so perfect that he even anticipated Balot's momentary error. He was a flawless strategist, and the implication of this was that his actions were constantly calculated to put Balot at the maximum disadvantage.

Reflexively, Balot shot at the object—a black sphere the size of a man's fist.

If it were a grenade or something similar then Oeufcoque would have no trouble protecting her from its effects.

But the object didn't shatter and didn't explode. It just landed quietly on the street and rolled toward Balot until it was only a few meters away from her. Then it released something—something invisible to the naked eye.

Balot suddenly felt the whole of her skin turning itchy. But only for a moment. The sensation quickly changed into something much worse: she was hit by severe pain in her back and stomach and arms and legs and face. It felt like her skin was peeling off of its own accord.

Balot staggered backward. The pain made her dizzy, and she almost lost consciousness. She lost all sense of *precision* and could no longer feel her surroundings. She was terrified.

"An Area Defense Weapon!" Oeufcoque said. The black sphere wasn't an explosive—it was something far worse than that to Balot. "A nonlethal weapon; it emits electromagnetic waves that cause terrible pain in all exposed areas."

Balot couldn't even respond—it was all she could do to shake her head.

"He's coming! He's right above us!"

Balot's arms shot up. She was completely following Oeufcoque's lead now. Boiled fired a shot, and his bullet scored a direct hit on Balot, slamming into her arms. Balot was enveloped by a wave of pain. It was like she had been slashed with razors all over and had hooks inserted into the thousands of cuts, and then had her whole skin ripped off her in one hideous flash.

"You need to *snarc* your bodily senses back into place! Balot—" Oeufcoque cried. Even as he did so, he covered her whole body in a defensive wall.

Balot wrenched her consciousness into action and *snarced* her own body. *Thinking I might try and experience some pain for a change*—who was it that had said that?

Balot *snarced* her feelings in order to *erase* them. To send them into space. *Just like she had always done in the past.*

She hadn't been able to master it at first, all that time ago. With her father. The image of his bearded face flashed up in the back of her mind…the way he undressed her, taking off her school uniform with his hands that had lost half of their fingers. Nauseating.

Erase it all!—I'm going to make it clean! I'm going to clean you up! I'd be better off dead. The bustle of the pleasure quarter. The noises that drifted in through the car windows. Erase the pain—turn the switch on and the giant shredder would get rid of anyone, close family or complete stranger. To be human is—to hurt. I just wanted to be loved. That's the goal. That's the trophy. I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to fuck you up. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!

There was the encroaching despair, and there was her heart that struggled tooth and nail to fight it off. Her stomach cramped. Her throat undulated, her mouth was filled with bile, and vomit dribbled down her chin. She cried. She cried as she puked. She didn't want to die. Such was the desperate cry of one who had never experienced unconditional love. *She didn't want to die.*

–Ash, cash, trash, crush…

She didn't want to die in this sorry state. The acrid taste of smoke was back in her mouth once more.

–Bash, rush, hash, gosh!…

She heard the nonsense rhyme spinning around. Balot's eyes closed and she was ready to sleep.

–Dish, wash, brush, flush…

She realized that a powerful electric current was passing through Oeufcoque and stimulating her pain receptors on her skin. She *grasped* the sensation, not as *real* pain, but as an artificially induced phenomenon.

–Flash, flesh…

The pain grew distant, and she came to her senses. Her fetid past subsided, and only her will to live remained.

–Wish…

Balot's eyes snapped open.

She realized that she was lying flat. A white defensive wall like an egg protected Balot, taking the bullets meant for her. Less than five seconds had passed since Balot had collapsed.

The pain had disappeared, but now Balot sensed the terrifying reality of her surroundings more keenly than ever. She felt that she could now sense the movement of even the hairs on Boiled's head as he fired at her from the wall he was standing on.

She gripped both her guns tightly. In an instant it all came flooding back to her: which gun to use and at what time. Which chip would draw out the right cards; which chip would gain that decisive victory. The muzzle on her left gun grew larger, and the caliber of the gun increased.

Balot stood up. That same moment, her protective shell powdered to dust, because Oeufcoque had dissolved the barrier, and because Boiled had fired another shot right into it.

Boiled stood on the wall, virtually an arm's length away from Balot.

His shot brushed past Balot's right flank and thundered into the distance.

Pieces of white shock-absorbent material flew in every direction. Balot's right arm rose up tentatively, shaking like a newly hatched chick who had just pecked its way out of its shell, but when she did manage to raise it her aim was true.

Boiled's eyes opened wide in surprise and delight.

Balot's right hand unloaded all ten rounds in her gun in three and a half seconds flat.

At the same time, her left hand had unleashed her *snarc's* fangs—she had caught Boiled's left leg with her *snarc* and was tearing into it.

The *PGF* wall that protected Boiled lost integrity, and a number of the bullets unleashed from Balot's left gun hit home, piercing his arms and shoulders. Blood and sparks gushed out of his left thigh.

Boiled's body seemed to float in midair. Or so it seemed at first to Balot, but then she realized that he had simply lost the strength to stay attached to the wall, and now his giant frame was falling toward her.

This was her chance. Balot prepared for the *exact* moment to fire her left-hand gun.

The left sleeve of her bodysuit *turned* with a squelch into a metal support frame to help her arm withstand the incredible recoil that would come from firing such a massive weapon.

But Boiled wasn't finished yet. Indeed, it was in just such moments that his true ferocity was revealed.

Even his apparent collapse was a feint. Without warning, he placed both feet on the wall and stood firm. The next instant he hurled the butt of his massive metal gun straight toward Balot's head with such power the air howled as it parted.

Balot's head flipped to one side to dodge. The sledgehammer blow grazed her forehead, ripping her skin open. The searing pain should have been immense.

But Balot had decided to stop feeling pain. Even if her skull had caved in at this point, she was moving with such sureness that she felt confident she would still finish her action.

She found the chink in Boiled's armor and carried out her sequence of attacks.

She threw her invisible fangs, her *snarc*, at Boiled's *PGF* wall to open up a hole.

A small opening, but it was enough. It took only one small card to spell the difference between defeat and decisive victory. Balot's left hand fired the gun into the opening.

The shock of the recoil caused her metal brace to shudder and fall off. Such was the caliber of the gun. And it was the bullet from this gun that now bored a hole all the way through Boiled.

The bullet pierced his left femur—and with it, the core of one of the four devices implanted in his limbs to generate his *PGF*.

Boiled's left leg swelled up from the inside like a balloon—and ruptured. The leg exploded into a mass of flesh and bone and blood, creating a shower of red and white somewhere above Balot's head.

The very next moment, Boiled had his leg—severed from the thigh down—in his hands and was *brandishing* it as a weapon.

Then some invisible force kicked Balot in the chest with tremendous power.

She flew from the sidewalk and her back slammed down onto the road. She jumped back up as quickly as she could.

Her body felt no pain. Her senses were clear, her heart calm.

Even so, she was somewhat taken aback at the sight she now faced.

Boiled *walked down* from the wall onto the sidewalk. His left leg was missing from just above his thigh. But this hadn't stopped him one iota; he walked on a phantom leg in its place.

Boiled had cranked up his remaining four antigravity devices to the fullest and made a leg-shaped *PGF* field where his real leg had been. He was barely bleeding, either—Balot could see that his *PGF* acted as an antigravitational tourniquet to stop the flow of blood from the exposed arteries.

"I won't be stopped just because I lose a limb or two, you know," Boiled whispered in a deep voice.

Then he charged.

Balot trembled. She fired quickly with her right-hand gun. Had she been able to use her voice, she would have screamed something between a shriek and a war cry as she fired over and over. Boiled's *PGF* was still there and it still deflected the flight paths of the bullets, but only just, and it wasn't perfect. Small gaps were opening up. Several bullets weaved their way through the openings and managed to skim Boiled's flesh.

But Boiled wouldn't stop. He ran straight at her, bringing down his blood-soaked right arm.

The air seemed to distort, and a physical mass of antigravity bore down on Balot.

Breathtaking *force* descended on her from the left, from the right, from the front.

Boiled's blow caused Balot's whole body to hurtle backward. She flew across the road and through the shop window of the building opposite. Oeufcoque covered her body as best he could,

but Balot *snarced* so that he focused his protection on a few vital areas. Boiled had thrown caution to the wind and half-surrendered his shield. If she didn't respond and do likewise, she wouldn't be able to truly face him down.

Balot clambered straight back up. Her surroundings were littered with broken glass from the window, and a number of stereos and other boys' toys were lying around on the floor.

Boiled pushed his *PGF* wall further in order to bring down pressure on Balot's surroundings.

Boiled drew near, and the moment he had his gun up again and ready to strike, Balot *snarced*. She turned all the building's lights on in a flash, dazzling Boiled as he drew near.

Again, Balot was virtually invisible against the backdrop of the bright lights, and again Boiled fired at her, not with any semblance of aim or accuracy, merely to keep shooting, to keep the pressure up. A stereo beside her exploded, but even as Boiled fired she was running out of the shop onto the pavement, falling to her side, and she fired at him again and again with her right-hand gun.

Balot didn't bother using her eyes either. She just sensed her opponent's position—his *existence*. She felt her own existence. She felt the *flow* of life and death that the two of them created by the mere virtue of existing.

Her opponent—*the other existence*—jumped into space and landed on the wall just above the shattered shop window.

Balot continued firing at him, tracking his movements accurately, and she jumped quickly to her feet.

A bullet that Boiled fired back grazed the top of her shoulder. Her bodysuit, *Made by Oeufcoque*, was ripped open, and the shock-resistant material fluttered around in fiery pieces, ignited by the heat of the terrifying bullet.

Then, without hesitation, Balot did the thing that she needed to do in order to take advantage of her situation.

She walked straight toward Boiled, firing as she advanced.

Boiled, too, walked straight along the wall.

"Curiosity…" he murmured, releasing another howling bullet as he spoke. "I just wanted to do this with you. With you two." Boiled's expression at this point could have been described as bold and daring, were it not for the vicious smile that played across his lips.

Balot's eyes opened wide. The right sleeve of her suit was squelching and *turning* into a weapon that she hadn't used before. A number of threads of light emerged from her right wrist and flew at Boiled. It wasn't until after the deadly weapon had already been released did Balot remember somewhere at the back of her mind that such a thing had once been used on her by the assassins that attacked her. *Wire whips*.

Boiled's gravity shield managed to repulse the wires amid a mass of violent midair explosions of sparks and fire.

As this was happening, Balot *snarced* one of the wires so that it went straight up and wrapped itself around the aluminum sash window frame, the one the old man had previously fired at with his shotgun.

Sparks flew, and the metal window frame was chopped roughly in half.

The wires came speeding back in toward her, and Balot was pulled up into the air by the momentum.

Balot kicked her legs down against the wall of the building as hard as she could. She soared

into the air. She was flying.

Using her bodysuit to glide through the air, Balot felt the *flow* created by the two of them, the clash of steel in this bloodthirsty and unforgiving world.

And then her feelings dissipated. It was as if her very existence was dissolving and then disappearing completely. This was how the two of them *survived*.

Now Balot's very feelings *were* the flow. *Balot* was the flow of battle.

One of Boiled's bullets sped toward Balot, missing her by inches.

The next moment, Balot was on the wall next to Boiled, looking down at him.

Boiled twisted his body to look up and sensed that Balot's next salvo was coming. Balot knew that Boiled was about to squeeze his trigger again too—she felt it in all her cells even before Boiled started to do it.

Fractions of a second before the trigger hit the base of the bullet, Balot's legs kicked against the wall again.

The white-hot bullet grazed Balot's flank, boring through her bodysuit again. The shock-absorbent material fell as fiery powder, and her exposed flesh was blackened where the bullet had passed by it.

Balot *snarced* the wires and cut them all.

Balot's body froze in midair. That instant felt like an eternity, and that eternity was all it took for Balot's right hand to squelch and *turn* into yet another deadly weapon.

Boiled had predicted something of the sort from Balot and aimed his gun accordingly.

Balot sped down, headfirst, practically sliding down the wall on her left shoulder, and just when she slipped below Boiled's feet the gun in her left hand erupted at Boiled.

The high-caliber bullet smashed into Boiled's bullet, creating a festive explosion of sparks as the two met and disintegrated. Amid the light show, Balot could sense the gap in Boiled's *PGF* precisely. No, more than that—*she had already sensed it*. She knew that a gap *had* to open up where it did.

As she fell, she swung the weapon in her right hand into that gap.

Balot knew full well that Boiled would do anything to protect his gun arm, even sacrifice his other arm.

The next instant, the highly magnetized blade of Balot's Hutchinson Knife sliced through Boiled's right arm just above his elbow. There was no resistance—it was like cutting through water.

Balot's sleeve *turned* into a cushion the instant before she landed.

She bounced once on the sidewalk, and the cushion detached itself. Balot adjusted her cuffs and stood on the sidewalk.

It thudded to the ground. Boiled's lower arm, severed cleanly from the rest of him. She could see part of Boiled's gravity-generating device peeping from the stump of the arm, spurting sparks and blood.

At the very same moment the rest of Boiled came tumbling down toward her too. He had lost his *PGF*.

This time it was no feint, but rather Boiled's final move, a last-gasp hit.

Boiled had now lost two out of five of his gravity-generating devices. Had he tried to keep himself up in the air, he wouldn't have been able to focus on his shield, leaving him vulnerable. He voluntarily threw away the high ground to hurtle himself at Balot.

He was like an over-ripened piece of fruit that a tree branch could no longer bear—he plunged toward the ground in order to splatter the pungent, sickly sweet flesh, to spread his lethal seed.

Balot *snarced* her bodysuit so that Oeufcoque covered her to protect her, and as he did, Boiled came plowing down to her, all his *PGF* shield now converted to the sole purpose of smashing into Balot like a sledgehammer.

Balot was slammed into the sidewalk by the incredible blow.

Where she hit, the concrete shattered and a large crack opened up under her back. This was an explosion, not just a blow. Balot's body was just the ground zero of *PGF* impact. The crack in the sidewalk traveled as far as the asphalt of the road, and the shock waves from the blow caused all the surrounding buildings to shudder, their windows smashing, and fire and smoke rose up all around.

When the dust cloud finally settled, it was down to the final hand.

Boiled, minus his right arm and left leg, was sprawled atop Balot, who was covered in a white shell. He was watching carefully.

Balot wasn't moving. Her face and body seemed to be covered in a cocoon, and it wasn't even possible to tell whether she was still breathing.

Are…you..hurt?

Suddenly a clear voice echoed around Boiled's head.

Why…does…it…hurt…you?

And for the first time in a very long time—indeed, what seemed like the first time ever—Boiled felt the warm glow that he'd felt when he first cradled the tiny golden creature in his hands.

Boiled wondered whether he was crying.

"No… I'm not hurt."

He wasn't crying. Not a single tear flowed from his eyes. Rather, blood dripped from the wounds in his right arm and left leg, staining Balot's white suit red.

Nice…and…warm…

A gentle voice. A voice that contained the last remaining fragment of Boiled's soul.

Boiled lifted his remaining hand and pointed his gun at Balot's head, and the hammer clicked into place.

"Try and stop me…try and stop my *nothingness*…"

Softly, Boiled pulled the trigger.

That instant the shell flew apart. Just as Balot had aimed for, this was the one moment Boiled could no longer move his gun and was committed. Her knife thrust forward and sliced the giant revolver in two. The powder in the remaining bullets exploded, and the gun that had embodied such lethal force scattered to the winds and was no more.

Balot emerged from inside her shell and stared down at Boiled.

She brought the gun in her left hand to Boiled's throat.

–This is what* your *sunny side up is…

Balot pressed the muzzle into his neck, but her face was overcome by sorrow. It was also covered in silvery powder. Her skin was *developing*. Even her black hair glittered silver.

Boiled didn't answer. He just stared straight back at Balot's face as he discarded the now useless half of his gun.

"The girl did well." The grip of the shattered gun hit the ground with a clang.

"You should be the one to finish it, Oeufcoque," Boiled whispered. He was close enough for

Balot to hear his breathing.

Balot opened her eyes. She couldn't help herself from yelling out. *Stop it! Stop this all!* But of course no sound came out. Why would it? All that emerged was a hollow whistle of air.

"I've spent twenty years on the battlefield. I am…most satisfied with my life," Boiled said. His eyes were fixed on Balot.

"Stop it, Boiled!" It was Oeufcoque's voice.

Boiled's eyes flicked to the source of the voice, Balot's left hand, and before she knew it his left hand, the one that had discarded one gun, was now on another—the gun in her hand.

Boiled stood up. Balot felt that she was about to be pulled up to her feet with him, but then Boiled's *PGF* kicked in, and she was sent sprawling against the wall behind her.

The blow winded her. Her gloves had been ripped off. She had an uneasy feeling that something had been taken from her—something important. There was a click, and for an instant Balot couldn't tell what it was.

Then she realized that it was the sound of life and death.

She realized that Boiled was holding the gun he had taken from her and looking her way.

The high-caliber gun that she'd had Oeufcoque *turn* into. It was still loaded. And the click that she had just heard was the hammer drawing back. More than that—it was Boiled's final act of doubling down.

"Oeufcoque!" Balot tried to cry, but no words emerged.

The name of the thing she'd had taken from her.

She was filled with raw despair. Balot had drowned in the flow and now looked into the black void that was the muzzle of the gun in Boiled's hand. *What other way was there to make her cursed life clean again?* She'd thrown away pain—now all there was left was to throw away the rest of her life.

Balot's eyes filled with tears.

–I don't want to die.

She was resisting death's sweet, seductive murmurings with a heartfelt cry that came from all her body and all her soul. Lost in the moment, she thrust the weapon in her right arm out. She knew full well that it was a futile gesture. But she had to do *something*, to grasp at straws for the chance to find *value* in her own life. It was her right to do so, her *choice*.

And then:

Nice…and…warm…

The gentle voice echoed around inside Boiled's mind. *I finally have it back*, he thought.

The warm glow he first felt when he'd held the golden mouse. The last fragment of his soul.

But all he could remember was the feeling of the mouse having been there. The warmth that he had once felt eluded him even now.

Boiled pulled the cold trigger, squeezing gently—and there was the sound of gunfire.

There was a wailing sound. Almost like a prayer shouted out loud at the top of your voice.

Balot's eyes opened even wider.

The bullet that Boiled had fired had missed her by a considerable margin. It smashed into the wall far above her head.

Had he *really* missed? *Boiled?* For a moment, Balot thought he really might have. But then she soon realized the truth. In a daze, she checked the weapon she held in her right hand.

A giant gun with a huge muzzle. The weapon that had up until a moment ago been a magnetized

knife had responded to Balot's will and *turned*.

"Oeufcoque…" Boiled called out. That name so full of warmth and kindness.

Then Boiled started to lower his arm. As if to say that his thick, sturdy arm could no longer support the weight of a single gun. He let go of the gun even before his arm was fully lowered, and it clattered across the sidewalk.

Right arm still holding the gun, Balot watched with wide eyes as Boiled disintegrated before her eyes.

Boiled's hand clutched at his chest. She realized by his actions that there was a large hole there. And that something was flowing out of it.

His life, Balot's heart murmured.

The *PGF* that had been acting as a substitute left leg disappeared. The giant figure that had once exuded such awesome pressure now crumpled to the ground in a heap. It was such a pathetic sight that it was almost comical. Before long, the wounds where his arm and leg had been severed spewed forth blood like water from a garden hose. His chest and back also overflowed with fresh blood, pumping out with an audible gurgle. Balot listened to the sound of a life pouring out, down the drain. Into the gutter. Of all the sounds that Balot had heard so far, this was the most wretched and most dreadful.

She stumbled toward Boiled to try and put an end to that awful sound.

Boiled slowly turned his head up to Balot. For a moment, she thought he was asking for her help.

But he was doing no such thing. Boiled merely gazed at Balot and said something to her. Scarcely audible.

Balot nodded. She wanted to show him that she had understood. She didn't know what else she could do.

Boiled's eyes moved, and he looked down at the blackness pouring out of his body.

His lips moved again. Then he closed his eyes—and Boiled moved no more.

Balot held her breath. Suddenly her right glove slipped off her hand and fell to the ground, along with the gun it had held. She heard the clang as it hit the sidewalk repeating over and over in her mind, and she felt such sorrow she was amazed she wasn't crying. She lost all her fighting spirit the moment the gun hit the ground.

–Oeufcoque?

She *snarced* her bodysuit, but there was no reply. This time it *really* was an empty shell.

Balot scrambled to pick up the gun. The muzzle was still red-hot.

–Oeufcoque?

She called him again and again. She wanted him to tell her what she should do. Suddenly, she realized something, and she stared at the gun. It revealed something about Oeufcoque's actions—his *will*—that caused her to be filled with such sorrow she thought her heart would never recover.

The gun had no trigger.

The pain that had once left Balot's body was now returning.

05

The wound to her temple throbbed. All her muscles screamed with pain.

The pain still remained even after the emergency services had given her first aid and the effects of Boiled's Area Device Weapon had been deactivated. Balot had taken it upon herself to feel the pain. It felt like it was the only thing she could do.

Oeufcoque remained a gun, utterly unresponsive.

Balot sat in the front passenger seat of the red convertible, cradling the gun in her lap, facing down the pain that racked her body. Without her realizing it, that rhyming ditty had somehow returned again.

–Dish, wash, brush, flush…

The fire brigade, clad in red, sprayed fire-retardant foam here and there from atop their fire engines that were themselves the color of the fires they were dispatched to put out. Residents emerged with their claims for compensation and insurance, and their details were taken down by world-weary city officials.

–Wash, crush, brush, hash…

The police had cordoned off the area and had located Shell's body—it had been safely deposited in some landfill, and he was now being stretchered away. The media were out in force, their cameras snatching what they could before they were pushed back behind the police line.

–Bash, rush, trash, ash…

People in white uniforms were taking blood samples and collecting body parts—Shell's fingers, Boiled's limbs—and wrapping them up in plastic bags before hauling them away. After that, the corpse was placed in a bag. There was only one dead body. Balot watched as the heavy bag was carted away with some difficulty.

–Flash, flesh, mash, goodish…

The Doctor was nearby, speaking to the police. Among them were some of the DAs that they had met or seen at the trial. They smiled and cheered the Doctor, who thanked them and basked in their praise. He was delighted.

–Rush, josh, wish, rush…

The Doctor parted from the police and came over to Balot.

–Finish, hush!

The ditty had now finished, and the Doctor was right there to fill the gap.

"Well, looks like this will bring your case to an end. The second case will now progress from the preliminaries and on to the real thing." The Doctor smiled gently. It was a smile of encouragement. *It's only just beginning, but we'll get through it all right*, he seemed to say. Of course, the Doctor now had a mountain of paperwork to tackle, not to mention his other tasks—his work really *was* just beginning. "Anyway, you've been through a lot of danger to get this far. It's fair to assume that your reward will be accordingly high. As for any regrets, I should be telling you to blame Oeufcoque and me, but…"

The Doctor rested both his arms on the car door and looked down at the gun that Balot was hugging close to her.

"If you wouldn't mind, uh, I wonder if you'd stay with Oeufcoque for a while to try and give

him some comfort. The outcome of this case…well, it's pretty close to the bone for both me and Oeufcoque, as I'm sure you can tell."

–That person said the same thing to me, at the end.

Balot looked toward the dead body that was being carted away as she *snarced* the car stereo to speak.

–"Stay by Oeufcoque's side for me," he said.

The Doctor's face looked surprised at this unexpected news. "Boiled said that?"

Balot nodded ever so slightly. Then she asked another question.

–Do you mind if I go for a little drive? With the car on AutoDrive? Just like when I first came here?

"Uh, aren't you a little tired, though? You know we still have the Humpty. You could always go and lie down there…"

–No, I'll be okay. Anyway, there's something I need to tell Oeufcoque. Something that man said.

"Boiled said something else?"

Balot nodded again.

–"Now I can finally sleep."

The Doctor didn't nod. He didn't shake his head. He just stood there silently, as if he were waiting for the words to fully sink in.

"I was involved in that experiment myself… I was one of the ones who made him so that he would never need to sleep. Never be able to sleep."

Balot's eyes lowered.

The Doctor shook his head. "There's still lots to do. That is, uh, there's a lot we need to do right now…"

–I know.

"We're going to have to save our grieving till later."

Balot nodded firmly. The Doctor needed someone to do that for him. The Doctor smiled, just a little, and left the scene.

≡

Balot peeled her thick bulletproof clothing away from the bodysuit she wore underneath. It thudded to the floor of the car.

Then she pulled her gloves off and exposed her perspiring hands to the cool air.

The red convertible avoided the early morning rush hour traffic on the main roads and wound its way toward the coast. The car passed over a giant bridge that traversed the ocean and reached an area covered by a concrete platform. Beyond the clean and fresh coastal region lay the industrial zone, slick with oil, and beyond that were the multi-story apartments and public residences comingling with the graffiti of homeless teenagers, all sleeping under the same purple sky.

Balot gazed at the banks of the city, held her gun to her chest, and cried.

As she cried, she became keenly aware of the fact that she hadn't died. She hadn't died and

was here, feeling pain.

She hadn't lost her life. She hadn't lost her body. She hadn't lost her heart. She had been wounded, and hurt, but that was it.

Oeufcoque had protected her from everything. Right through to the bitter end. Even at that moment when, in order to live, she *had* to kill—Oeufcoque had protected Balot.

Shell's past had finally caught up with him and pushed its way back inside his mind. Boiled had welcomed the end to the senseless killing that he had so wanted. These were the final steps that the two would ever take up the stairway to heaven—to *Mardock*.

Oeufcoque, too, had taken a step up that spiraling stairway. He had heard Balot crying out that she didn't want to die and accepted it. He had repudiated his former user, transcended his own existence as a mere tool, and voluntarily taken it upon himself to kill. In order to keep Balot safe. In order to stop Boiled from killing her.

In order to stop *anyone* from killing Balot.

Balot heard waves. She could smell the sea spume. The air was heavy, and she caught a whiff of all sorts of other smells mixed in. The giant industrial machines in the factories were creaking, cradled by the stagnant air.

The red convertible sped down Sea Street—the breakwater that the city had used to declaw the ocean, to tame it to the city's *needs*. The car moved as if it were making a dash to freedom, away from something that wanted to press in on it and smother it.

I'm just a tool, Oeufcoque had once said. *A tool designed to protect its user.* And a tool that was kind and gentle and patient and taught her so many things. Balot searched for the words that would call him back, but they disappeared from her mind as soon as they appeared. The Doctor had asked Balot to comfort Oeufcoque, but all she could do was what she was doing at the moment. Hold him tightly to her chest.

Tears flowed from her eyes, dried, and then flowed again. She cried for herself, and then she cried for someone else.

Suddenly she felt the steel in her arms grow warmer. She sensed Oeufcoque. But even though she waited, he didn't stir. It was as if he really *had* become an egg. He stayed hidden inside his metal shell. But he was definitely there.

–Oeufcoque?

Balot called out to him quietly. There was no answer.

She unfolded her arms in order to examine the gun more closely. That was when it happened.

"Keep holding me like that," Oeufcoque said in a little voice. "I want you to hold me for a little longer."

Balot felt something warm spread out within her chest.

When she held Oeufcoque, he could feel her too. Her heart pounded at the thought. Oeufcoque had been sensing Balot all along. Her body heat, her feelings, more. Not just now, but always. This was much more than just looking at each other from opposite sides of the mirror, never to touch the other.

People *touching* her, *feeling* her—this had always been Balot's curse, the bane of her life. It was the source of all her fears. To be *taken*, to *have done to her* as others wished. In order to protect herself against that, her only strategy had been to hide inside a shell, to look on at the world from the other side of the mirror.

But now her curse was lifting. She *had* been cleansed. The final piece of the jigsaw puzzle in

her heart *had* been filled in, without her even realizing it.

I'm going to make you clean. I'm going to clean you up. The insidious whisper that had followed her around and dogged her at every turn was now detaching its claws from her mind. Before long it became just a set of meaningless words and disappeared into the ether.

All at once Balot's eyes began to overflow with more tears. This time, though, they were a different type of tear.

–Let's cry together, Oeufcoque. Let's cry so that our sorrows will disappear, just a little bit.

Balot hugged the gun with no trigger.

Then, with her eyes turned up to the sky about to break dawn, Balot wondered what she could do. What she *should* do. She wanted to stay embracing the half-baked little egg forever—this gun with no trigger. She *knew* that this was what she wanted. However bad things got, however burnt-out her life became, she wanted always to remain as someone who could do that. Right now, that was what she desired. It was what she could do. And it was what she *should* do.

The car had finished its tour of the coastline, and before Balot knew it they were heading back in toward the city.

The skyline was approaching, with all its tall buildings and numerous roads threading in between them.

In the city there would be setbacks, discouragements, and the hands that emerged from dark graves to hold people perpetually back.

The specters of the past would no doubt continue to rise up and rend the silence with clamorous gunfire.

As she gazed at the view of the city, Balot remembered the name of the man who had died and nodded softly.

To stay by someone's side—to be with someone you wanted to do that with, and who wanted to do that with you in return—that was the last bastion of hope. It made the city bearable.

In the same way that Balot now embraced Oeufcoque, the morning light of Mardock City gently caressed Central Park—that grand junction where all paths crossed. The *Spot of Spots*.

Balot returned there.

To the place where she had once died.

In order to *live*.

FIN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo by Ichiro Fujisato

Born in Gifu Prefecture in 1977, Tow Ubukata was exposed to a blending of cultures from early childhood until the age of fourteen, having lived in Singapore and Nepal due to his father's work. In 1996, while in college, Ubukata won the first Sneaker Taisho Gold Prize for his light novel *Kuroi Kisetsu* (Black Season) and thus debuted as a writer. In 2003, he won the Japan SF Award for *Mardock Scramble*, originally published as a three-volume series. He is involved in a wide range of projects including anime production for *Fafner*, video game production, and original content writing for comics such as *Le Chevalier D'Eon*. His other works include the *Bye-Bye Earth* and *Spiegel* novel series. In 2009, Ubukata published his first historical novel, *Tenchi Meisatsu*, focusing on a mathematician of the Edo period. In 2010, the novel hit the bestseller lists and was awarded the Honya Award (voted on by book retailers).

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DRAGON SWORD AND WIND CHILD BY NORIKO OGIWARA
The God of Light and the Goddess of Darkness have waged a ruthless war across the land of Toyoashihara for generations. But for fifteen-year-old Saya, the war is far away—until the day she discovers that she is the reincarnation of the Water Maiden and a princess of the Children of the Dark. Raised to love the Light and detest the Dark, Saya must come to terms with her heritage even as the Light and Dark both seek to claim her, for she is the only mortal who can awaken the legendary Dragon Sword, the weapon destined to bring an end to the war. Can Saya make the choice between the Light and Dark, or is she doomed—like all the Water Maidens who came before her…?

MARDOCK SCRAMBLE BY TOW UBUKATA
Why me? It was to be the last thought a young prostitute, Rune-Balot, would ever have… as a human anyway. Taken in by a devious gambler named Shell, she became a slave to his cruel desires and would have been killed by his hand if not for the self-aware All-Purpose Tool (and little yellow mouse) known as Oeufcoque. Now a cyborg, Balot is not only nigh-invulnerable, but has the ability to disrupt electrical systems of all sorts. But even these powers may not be enough for Balot to deal with Shell, who offloads his memories to remain above the law, the immense assassin Dimsdale-Boiled, or the neon-noir streets of Mardock City itself.

ROCKET GIRLS: THE LAST PLANET BY HOUSUKE NOJIRI
When the Rocket Girls accidentally splash down in the pond of Yukari Morita's old school, it looks as though their experiment is ruined. Luckily, the geeky Akane is there to save the day. Fitting the profile—she's intelligent, enthusiastic, and petite—Akane is soon recruited by the Solomon Space Association. Yukari and Akane are

then given the biggest Rocket Girl mission yet: to do what NASA astronauts cannot and save a probe headed to the minor planet Pluto and the very edge of the solar system.

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